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MISSING PAGE

TEXAS RANGERS

VOLUME 34, NUMBER 2 A THRILLING PUBLICATION

Secret of the Central Hills by Jackson Cole 13

Spur of the Moment by Ray Humphreys 66

Right Busy Evening by Sam Brant 71

Maltby the Avenger by Harold Preece 75

Powdersmoke Insurance by Lee Bond 81

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HIYA, gals and galluses! Yep, I'm a cantankerous ol' mossyhorn, always bellowing about something. But you all who are used to me, you know that I can boost as well as kick and paw dust over my back. I make it a rule, whenever I raise a kick, to find some good thing to boost.

So here we go, with the usual assortment of brickbats and bouquets.

It rankles me some, how little we hear about goings-on in our own U.S.A. The smart boys of newspaper and radio rattle off cut-and-dried daily news about goings-on abroad. But in print and palaver, trends and events right here at home are skimped or overlooked completely. What's going on from Texas west, outside of crimes and accidents, is seldom learned.

Rootless Roamers

Do you know that a large and increasing part of our Western population is homeless and voteless?

How many? I don't know. Nobody knows, really. But these rootless roamers run up to a million, maybe more. They are our permanently displaced population. They stay nowhere long enough to get counted by the census-taker, or to share in the duties and privileges of citizenship.

They lack not only housing, but they are deprived, under present stuffy laws that define residents the rights to public education, to hospital services and to other benefits that most of us take for granted and enjoy.

Now who are these people? Why don't we hear about them? Well, we'd hear plenty if they took root in some one place, for just one short season. The whole world would know hunger. Europe's displaced persons might starve. Because these migratory crop workers are far from being idle drifters. They are essential links in the machinery of food production, and without 'em it would creak to a dead standstill.

"Fruit Tramps"

Now I don't aim to stir up a mess that will settle itself someday by its own internal upheavals. It so happens that these people, which the West knows as "fruit tramps," have chosen their own calling. For all they miss, they have a pretty good thing in several ways. They enjoy independence that clock-punchers might well envy, because they come and go at will, are beholden to their own efforts only, for they do piecework.

Crop workers earn big pay. Latest figures show that experienced pickers in that vast, new cotton belt of central California make up around $200 a week. A couple does, that is, along with one or two youngsters that work part time. Lots of other field, orchard and garden crops from Texas west pay as well, or even better in exceptional instances.

The interesting thing is, just what has produced this condition so unlike the normal and approved pattern of American life?

Here's How It Happened

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Then they need help, lots of it, sudden and at exactly the right time. There isn't nearly enough labor at hand, even when some har-

(Continued on page 8)

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Music is the magic key to friendship, fun, romance. The person who can play a musical instrument is always sure of a welcome. Why not let music open up a new world for you. Thousands have discovered unexpected pleasure and profit in music, thanks to the unique method that makes it amazingly easy to learn.

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THE FRONTIER POST

(Continued from page 6)

vest operations are mechanized, too. In the very nature of land yield, harvest calls for the supreme effort.

An Army of Transients

Here's where the grasshopper army of transients move in, make camp and go to work. They know where and when to go, out of experience, and are directed and advised by hundreds of regional offices set up by the Farm Labor Bureau throughout the West.

And so they come, as crops mature and ripen, a thousand or more to pick apples in Washington's Yakima Valley, thousands more in the lettuce fields of Arizona, other thousands in walnut and filbert and citrus groves, from Oregon's Willamette Valley to southern California, carrot jerkers, sugar beet and celery choppers from Utah to Salinas Valley, berry pickers to the north, ladder workers in the date gardens of Coachella Valley, many thousands to all the tomato, pea and bean fields and canneries, and to the early melon sections where long freight trains wait on sidings.

Every crop has a season, and each must be sacked, boxed or crated and shipped. So crop workers are perpetually on the go, north and south, from the Pacific to the Rockies, and down through the desert Southwest to the Texas gulf.

Each year, wherever they wander, huge new areas are seen under cultivation, because the need for food is acute in a growing world. So, too, the army of fruit tramps grows, and is bound to increase.

Growers are hard put to attract the best of them. The professional picker is apt to skim the cream of the crop, then when earnings drop to drift on to easier pickings. So sometimes a bounty or premium is paid to pickers who see the harvest through.

Primitive Arrangements

Other growers make a sincere attempt to satisfy their crop workers with comfortable shelter, or at least decent camps with adequate sanitary conveniences. But transient folk, not always appreciative, often misuse and destroy the comforts provided for their

(Continued on page 10)

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THE FRONTIER POST

(Continued from page 8)

seasonal use. So it is, that even a clean shower stall, with hot water, is still a luxury not often found in most crop labor camps. A bath shouldn't be held a luxury for men and women that work long hours in hot, dusty fields. But arrangements for bathing, washing and cooking are crude and primitive in most places where fruit tramps congregate, at work or between jobs.

All must have some means for travel and to carry simple possessions. So crop workers go about in house trailers, usually miserable, unsightly wheeled shanties, or have luggage trailers or trucks. Or without those, old jalopies heaped high with bedding, pots and pans.

They travel about in small groups, usually, from two or three up to a half-dozen families, and since they go far and often they have created a universal need for a special sort of travel conveniences.

The highway departments of various States could furnish these with a minimum of tax cost. But sorry to say, they seldom do so. It is the custom for fruit tramps, hither and yon, to stop outside the towns, on widened pulloffs beside the roaring traffic of busy highways.

Here they eat and rest and will remain where night overtakes them. Such places become eyesores. Littered and filthy, they lack even simplest sanitation, seldom even a trash can or the attention of occasional cleanup crews.

Texas supplies a generous system of public stopovers. But some other states are neglectful, and instead of aiding the humble traveler, seem to endeavor to make all natural rest stops as uncomfortable, inconvenient and unattractive as possible.

No Camping Signs

Heaps of gravel and other road repairing material blocks access to turnoffs. Barrier posts are planted on links of old road fallen into disuse. And lately came a rash of inhospitable, official signs warning, "no overnight camping allowed," although it's a time-honored right in the West for the wayfarer to rest his weary head where he will, so long as it is on public ground 30 feet or more from the roadway.

That's the life of a fruit tramp. When the

(Continued on page 92)

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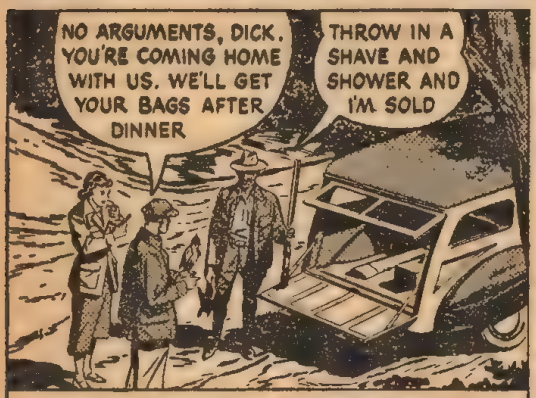
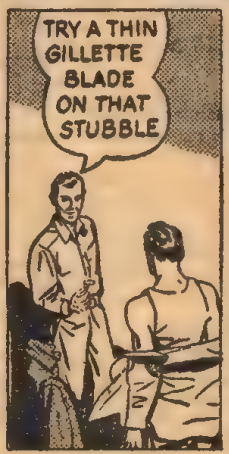
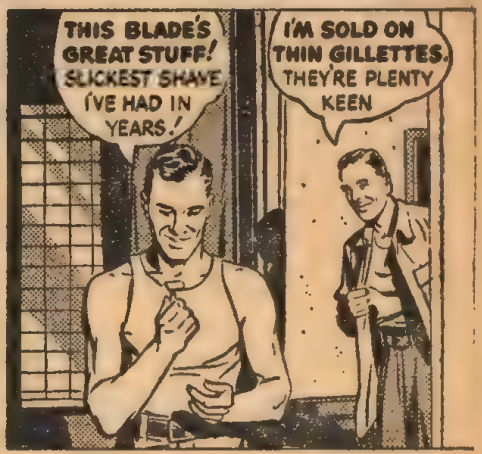
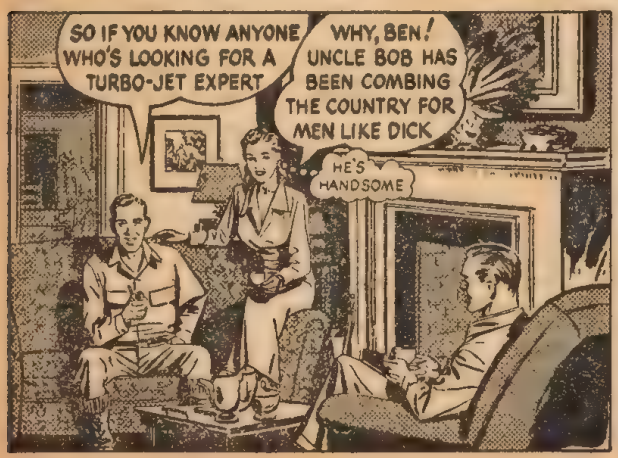


AND SO AFTER A DAY-LONG CROW HUNT WITH HAWK AND GUN...





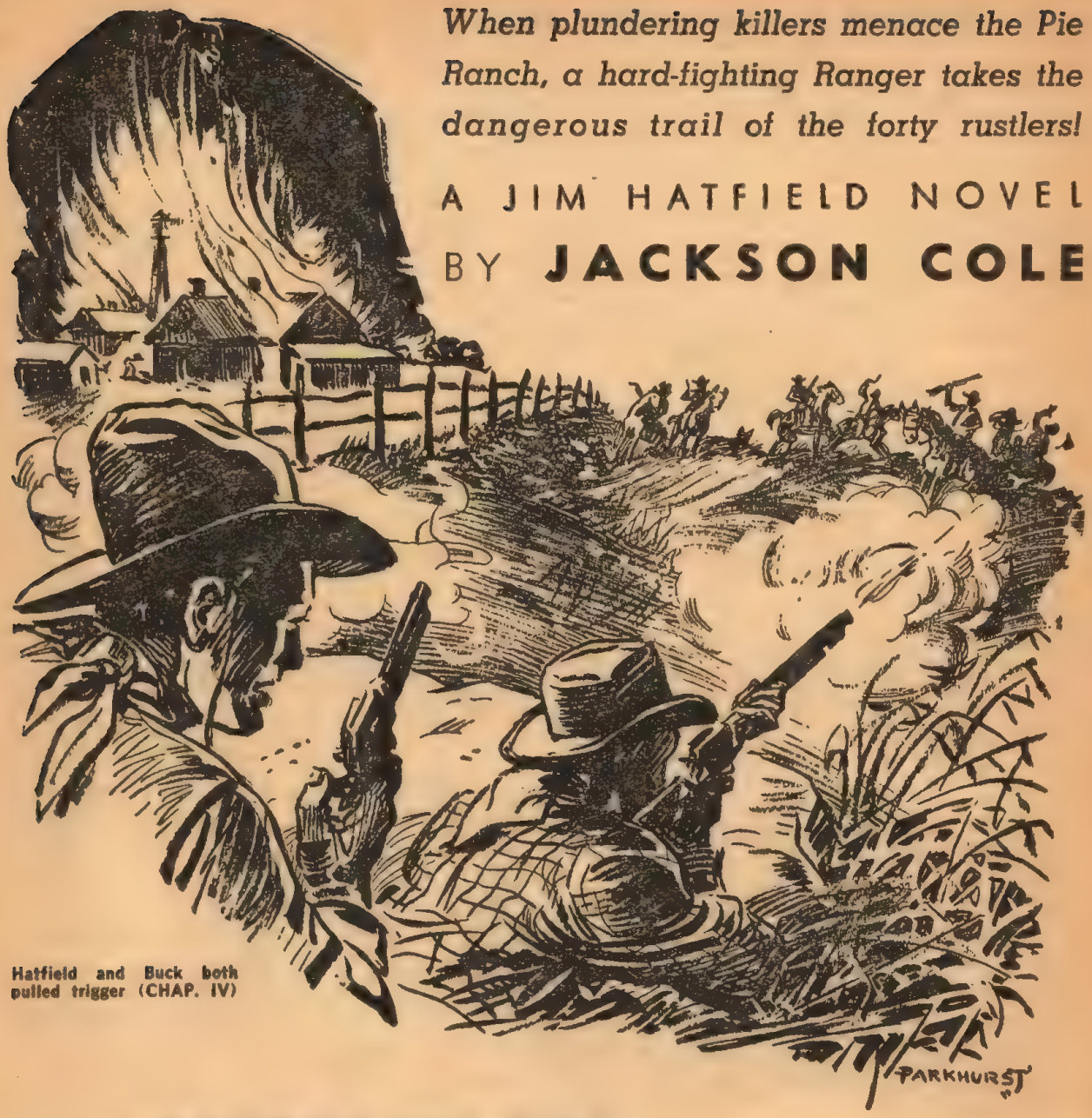

SO IF YOU KNOW ANYONE WHO'S LOOKING FOR A TURBO-JET EXPERT
WHY, BEN! UNCLE BOB HAS BEEN COMBING THE COUNTRY FOR MEN LIKE DICK
HE'S HANDSOME

MEN, WHEN IT COMES TO EXTRA SHAVING COMFORT, PLUS ECONOMY, YOU CAN'T BEAT THIN GILLETTES. THEY'RE KEENER AND LAST LONGER THAN ANY OTHER LOW-PRICE BLADES. YOUR FACE IS PROTECTED FROM NICKS AND IRRITATION, TOO, FOR THIN GILLETTES FIT YOUR GILLETTE RAZOR PRECISELY. ASK FOR THIN GILLETTES IN THE CONVENIENT NEW 10-BLADE PACKAGE
THIN Gillette 10 BLADES
10-25¢
4-10¢
NEW TEN-BLADE PACKAGE HAS COMPARTMENT FOR USED BLADES

When plundering killers menace the Pie Ranch, a hard-fighting Ranger takes the dangerous trail of the forty rustlers!

A JIM HATFIELD NOVEL

BY **JACKSON COLE**



Hatfield and Buck both pulled trigger (CHAP. IV)

SECRET OF THE CENTRAL HILLS

CHAPTER I

Savage Intruders

A BENIGN sun bathed the central mountain region of Texas, softening the gaunt upthrusts of black granite peaks and lightening the tangled forests looming over the valley.

Stands of cedar stretched south, west and east on the slopes, but below the range had been cleared so the nutritious grasses could come in. On this herbage subsisted longhorn cattle while in turn men lived by the animal products.

Granite Creek flowed northerly to join

the mighty Colorado River of Texas. The tributary rose in the upper levels and its water was pure and unfailing, serving not only the stock but men who lived by it.

"Easy" Naylor, a cowboy who worked for Claude Pirie, owner of the "Pie" Ranch, rode the range with a song on his lips. He was cheerfully loyal to the brand for which he worked, a brand which was a triangular wedge, crudely suggesting a slice of pie.

At twenty the question of why men should settle in certain spots or why humans should even be dependent on grass-eating animals, never troubled Easy Naylor. His philosophy was that here was the world and that he was in it to enjoy himself. All of which made him a pleasant companion, ready for a laugh or a practical joke with his closest friend, Ab Bunton, also a Pie rider.

A slender young man, he wore a blue shirt, leather-armored pants and a generous Stetson. He seemed to belong to the world about him in which were grazing cattle, some marked with the pie wedge and others with the Square 4 of the Walsh brothers with whom Pirie shared the area. A faint flame of smoke attracted his attention, and Naylor turned his mustang. A fire could spell danger. Honest people built them, but so did rustlers. A running iron had to be heated to blotch a brand. And in many parts of this country, great damage might be done to woods and grass.

Because of a cedar grove on a rise he approached the smoke undetected. Dropping rein, he quietly made through the evergreens and took up a post from which he could watch.

"What in purple blazes they up to?" he wondered.

The four men he saw were busy men, working with a metal shaft with a long handle at right angles to it stuck from the earth. They would strike the top of it with a sledge-hammer and, putting their weight on the handle, turn it as far as they could.

One of them was a plump fellow, as round as a balloon at the waist. His complexion was swarthy and he wore corduroys and high laced boots.

Another was tall and lean, wearing black trousers and a white shirt. His hat was pushed back and he had such an air of authority that he seemed to be boss. He would give an order now and then which Naylor could see accentuated the color of his face which was a violent lobster-red.

SADDLE and pack horses stood near and there was camping equipment, food supplies and arms. But no cows were around, which would have been the case had they been cattle thieves.

Naylor waited to see what it was all about. The man in charge went to the fire and began blowing it up with a hand bellows. The core borer was pulled out of the hole and brought over. Material was poked from the lower cylinder just above the steel cutting edges. The blower went full blast, and the coals glowed like a blacksmith's forge.

The product was picked out with metal tongs and dropped on a flat stone. The red-faced leader banged at it with a hammer, then turned and nodded.

The fact they were not rustlers aroused Naylor's curiosity. He rose and started toward them.

"Hi, there!" he sang out.

The men became alert and turned to watch his approach. Naylor grinned in his friendly fashion.

"What yuh huntin', gents?" he drawled.

"Hunh-hunh!" The leader cleared his throat and sharply sniffled.

His eyes were pale brown, his hair lightish. High cheek-bones accentuated his long, narrow nose. He had an air of stuffy dignity and he offered the cowboy a fleeting smile which had no humor in it.

"Good afternoon, young man," he said. "Hunh-hunh!"

The short, fat fellow looked worried. He seemed to puff himself up and looked ready to jump away. The other two, ordinarily tough characters who wore Colts, said nothing, but waited for orders.

Easy Naylor stared at the flat stone.

"Yuh savvy this land belong to Claude Pirie, my boss, don't yuh?" he asked.

"Hunh-hunh—yes," said the leader. "I'm Professor Tazewell Farris. This is Mister Emile Deets, familiarly known as

Chuckwalla." That fleeting grin rippled the crimson cheeks as Farris nodded toward the plump fellow. "Delighted you chanced by, sir, delighted. We must have a drink together."

Farris was most amiable, fairly mealy-mouthed as he fulsomely welcomed Naylor and introduced himself and his friends.

At Farris's order "Chuckwalla" Deets brought out a flask of liquor which was passed around. Easy Naylor squatted with them, reassured by Farris's friendly words and manner.

"The boss will be mighty interested in all this, suh," he remarked.

"Of course. Hunh-hunh."

Farris rose and walked past Naylor. He extracted a bundle of Cuban cheroots from a bag and came back, offering one to the cowboy. As Naylor scratched a match and bent over it to light up, Farris again stepped behind him.

Pulling a short-nosed revolver from under his shirt Farris aimed pointblank at the back of his guest's head and pulled the trigger.

The crack of the pistol echoed over the range. Easy Naylor slowly rolled to his side while Chuckwalla Deets puffed himself up.

"Boss!" he bleated. "Yuh-ve killed him!"

"I had to, Chuckwalla. He would have given away my plans and I'm not ready yet for that." He looked at the other two men. "O'Hara, you and Roose carry him to the woods and dump him. Chuckwalla, pack up and brush out the traces. Fill in that hole. We'll move on across the creek."

JIM HATFIELD

Farris cleared his throat and sniffed, entirely unaffected by what he had done. . . .

Almost two days later, Ab Bunton rode north on the east bank of Granite Creek, trying to cut sign of his partner's mustang. Easy Naylor had been missing for over twenty-four hours. His horse had not

come in and nothing had been heard from Easy.

Bunton was worried. Naylor had been as close to being a brother as Bunton had ever had. They had been on sprees together in Marble Falls and farther on to Lampasas, across the Colorado. They had shared the toil of a dangerous profession.

Ab Bunton was a bigger man than Easy. He was a handsome blond Texas giant, with crisp hair and wide-set blue eyes. The black horse he straddled was larger than the usual mustang, for it took a real animal to bear his weight. His features were good, while a strong jaw showed determination. He wore silver-spurred boots, leather chaps and shirt, and his sandy Stetson was canted on his head and held by a tight chinstrap. A Colt rode in his holster and a carbine was under one leg.

OTHER waddies of the Pie also were out searching. They had split up in order to cover a large area of the great range. The general direction Easy Naylor had taken was known, but that was all, and they found no signs of him where imprints of cattle and mustang hoofs crossed and crisscrossed the grassy earth.

Ab Bunton watched the ground but he would look up now and again to search the horizon and even the sky, as a good trailer must. So far he had had no luck.

The sun was nearly down on the western mountains when his squinting eyes, narrowed to the light, swept the heavens again. He cursed as he sighted several black specks east of the stream and where he was searching. Turning that way, he found that the buzzards had dropped into a cedar grove on a little rise.

He found what was left of Easy Naylor in a thicket near the rim of the grove. Not far away lay Easy's hand-carved saddle, but his horse had either been stolen or turned loose. If free the mustang would probably stay out since he was a local colt, hardly broken. Only a cowboy would term such an animal tame.

Bunton felt stricken at loss of his best friend but he pulled himself together. A quick investigation showed him that Naylor had been shot in the back of the head and must have died quickly without a chance to defend himself. Bunton trailed out and cut sign, but most of it had been brushed out. There was nothing else he could do now, for there was not much light left and as the sun dipped behind the hills he picked up Naylor's remains and started for home.

He was not yet in when a brief but violent thunder shower broke over him. The rain beat hard on the ground and Bunton's lips tightened grimly, for he knew it would obliterate what marks the killers might have left.

The Pie stood on high ground back from Granite Creek's high-water mark. Buildings in that locality had to be placed out of flood reach and Claude Pirie's home was about a mile east of the creek, which supplied the range cattle. Crystal springs issuing from splits in the bedrock offered plenty of water for the human inhabitants, as well as for the mustangs which were kept in the corrals. The rill from the pool had been directed through a large wooden trough and brought close to the back door of the ranchhouse.

As Bunton approached he saw that oil lamps, burning inside, made the windows yellow rectangles in the night. It was all a familiar scene, that ranch home with its granite foundation and stone walls halfway up, with cedar slabs finishing the upright sides. Home-cut cedar shingles covered the sloping roof. During the years sleeping wings and a kitchen lean-to had been added to the main section. There was a long bunkhouse and barn made of the same materials, to be found locally, a springhouse, crib and fenced pens where saddle horses were held. A lantern on a high post offered light, but Bunton hardly needed it in the home yard.

He laid Naylor out in the barn and went to tell his friends the terrible tidings.

CHAPTER II

A Logical Story

THE Pirie family was at supper. Bunton walked through and a girl who was helping to serve the meal turned and came to greet him.

"Ab!" she exclaimed. We were wondering where you were. Sit down and I'll fix you a plate. The other boys have

Hatfield made a lightning draw and threw a hasty shot at Farris, which whizzed over the man's head (CHAP. VIII)

all finished eating."

Lara Pirie, Claude's eighteen-year-old daughter, was a slim brunette with long-lashed violet eyes and a vivid face. Bunton thought she was the prettiest girl in Texas, and that meant the world.

Claude Pirie, the boss of the Pie, glanced around, his mouth full of steak. Though slight in stature Pirie had a dynamic nature which more than compensated for lack of size. Gray salted his black hair, and he wore blue pants tucked into halfboots and a close-cropped mustache decorated his lip. A reversed bandanna was at his lean throat above his clean shirt.

Pirie had pioneered in the central mountains and, when a youth, had carved out his ranch from the wilderness. He had had to fight for life with Lipan and other savage tribes of the region, clear brush from valleys and slopes in starting from scratch. He had earned what he held.

Ella Pirie, Lara's mother, was five years younger than her husband. She had created and graced the comfortable home, hardly an easy task. Such women had a courage beyond a man's. Ella had a sweet face, but her slimness had been lost in the shuffle of hard work from dawn to bedtime over the years. There were two boys —young Claude who was eleven, and Tim, who was nine. Also a dozen waddies who were treated as members of the family. The hands slept in the bunkhouse and as a rule ate before the Piries, as they had tonight.

"Thanks, Lara," Bunton said gravely. "Will yuh keep a bite for me? I can't eat just yet. Boss, would you mind steppin' outside for a minute?"

Pirie realized at once what must have occurred. He jumped up and accompanied Bunton to the barn. He stared sadly at Naylor's body as he listened to the story which Bunton told.

"We'll start first thing in the mornin' and try to come up with the killers," growled the boss.

He was burning with fury inside and so were the other Pie men who had gathered to hear Bunton's tale. It looked like a wanton gunning of their friend, and that called for swift reprisals.

But three days after the discovery of Naylor's body, Ab Bunton knew no more about the business than when he had first discovered his friend dead. The Pie outfit, as well as the four Walsh brothers and their riders had hunted for miles around but rain and wind had wiped out any faint traces which might have been left by the unknown enemy. In lower areas the brush had been cut off but the cedar forests and chaparral on the slopes were so dense that a man could scarcely make his way through afoot, let alone on horseback. At last the weary searchers had been forced to admit defeat.

Bunton was not far from the ranchhouse that morning when they had returned home defeated when he saw half a dozen riders coming. He became alert, for they were strangers and he was uneasy because of Naylor's death. He moved toward them and reined in his mustang, raising his right hand in the Spanish salute. They answered with friendly waves. Bunton waited for them quietly, but he was ready for trouble, too.

A TALL man in black trousers and a straight hat of the same hue, a white shirt and shiny boots, was in the lead. As he rode nearer Bunton could see his features, could see the lightish hair under his hat, a lobster-red countenance, sharp cheek-bones, and a long nose. He held himself stiffly.

"Good morning, young fellow," the red-faced man sang out. "I'm Professor Tazewell Farris. Is that Pirie's ranch over there?"

"That's it," Bunton said shortly.

A plump man rode behind Farris. His skin was dark and he wore corduroys, a brown hat and high boots. The rest of the riders wore range garb—riding breeches, vests or leather shirts, Stetsons, and spurred boots. They were armed according to the custom.

Perhaps Farris sensed Bunton's suspicion for he signalled his party to stop and came on alone, smiling in a friendly way.

Attached to his saddle was a butterfly net with a collapsible handle, and two leather cases.

"Hunh-hunh!" he offered, smiling. "I'm an entomologist, young fellow."

"Yuh don't mean it,' drawled Bunton. "I thought they were all wiped out in the French and Indian wars."

FARRIS blinked, then broke into a laugh.

"Quite humorous, my boy," he murmured, but he spoke in a condescending manner which the independent Bunton did not like. "Perhaps you'll understand if I say I collect insects for scientific purposes."

"A bug hunter," said Ab.

"You've hit the nail on the head. I understand all this range east of Granite Creek belongs to Pirie. I want to ask his permission to hunt specimens in the vicinity."

Bunton shrugged. "That's up to the boss."

"Of course."

Farris pushed his horse past Bunton's dancing mustang and led the procession toward the Pie ranchhouse. His riders were well-behaved, though to Bunton they looked salty. He trailed them in and dismounted, leaning against the corral fence and rolling a quirly as Claude Pirie came over to greet the visitors.

"Light and set," Pirie invited the self-styled professor.

"Hunh-hunh."

Farris dismounted and came smilingly to offer his hand to Pirie, introducing himself as he had to Bunton. He then unhooked one of the black-leather cases and opened it. Pirie and Bunton craned to see what was inside. Butterflies, beetles and other insects treated with a varnishlike liquid were impaled on long pins in the specimen box.

"Shore, catch all the bugs yuh can, Perfessor," said Pirie heartily. Then a thought occurred to him. "Say, how long yuh been around."

"Several days," Farris said blandly. "But we have been on the west side of Granite Creek."

Pirie's eyes narrowed. "That belongs to the Walsh boys. Did yuh talk to them? If so I didn't hear of it."

"No, truth to tell I didn't. We were up in the cedar hills and weren't sure who owned the land."

"Huh." Pirie frowned. "See here. One of my waddies was shot dead just this side of the creek three days ago."

Farris clucked with distress. "So that's what you were all looking for!" he exclaimed. "We saw you, but stayed hidden, not being acquainted with the customs of the vicinity. A pity about your friend. How heart-rending." He seemed much affected as he expressed sympathy.

Pirie had been given a lead. "Why did yuh hide from us?" he asked.

"Oh, for most excellent reasons, sir! Perhaps this is somehow connected with what occurred. Yes, it might well be." Farris clucked and sniffed.

"Well?" demanded Pirie.

"Three or four days ago," the professor said gravely, "about the time you say your cowboy was killed, we sighted a large band of riders, forty to fifty of them. They seemed to be coming in from the southwest and passed not far from our camp in a dense cedar grove. They had a fierce aspect so we remained quiet, out of sight. Whites and Negroes, Texans, Mexicans and mixed breeds mingled together. All were heavily armed. They passed by our hiding place and disappeared into the thick chaparral. In our opinion they were bandits, perhaps cattle thieves of the worst type."

Pirie was startled. "We ain't lost any cows that I savvy, yet," he growled.

"Your man may have run into this savage crew," Farris told him. "From their looks they seemed capable of any outlawry. Naturally when we sighted horsemen in the distance the following day or two we didn't call attention to ourselves."

It was a logical story. Pirie and Ab Bunton were impressed. A rustler band passing through might have shot Naylor.

Pirie had the Texan's breezy hospitality. Drink and food were offered and Lara and Mrs. Pirie bought refreshments to the visitors as they all gathered in the shade of the front porch.

Farris was over-polite, almost fawning in his manner.

Finally, saying he did not wish to trespass, Farris drew out Pirie to tell of his range boundaries and learned, the limits of the rancher's holdings. From this ensued a discussion of land titles and on this topic Farris seemed well-versed.

After an hour the visitors left. Farris pleaded he was pressed for time and thanked Pirie heartily for his hospitality, as well as his invitation to stay for the evening meal, but declined this.

THE men rode off southwest, a direction which would eventually bring

The Ranger could not even see the man in the tree roost, but he addressed him in a confident voice (CHAP. IX)

them to the wooded heights near the source of Granite Creek. Ab Bunton watched them with calculating eyes.

"Funny duck, that perfessor hombre," he decided. "That Chuckwalla Deets, who hardly said a word for himself durin' the whole call, was a queer one, too."

But Ab had no reason to suspect Farris and his party. It was only a feeling inside him, what he would call a hunch, which made him distrustful. Then the story about the big band of outlaws had fitted in perfectly, yet there had been no other report on this, nothing except Naylor's death to suggest that outlaws had been around.

"We'll have to keep an eye peeled for 'em, unless they hustled on through," he thought.

Pirie gave order to that effect later, telling his men to be on the watch for rustlers. Had men like that tangled with Easy Naylor they might have considered discretion the better tactic and hurried away to other fields.

The more Ab Bunton thought about it, though, the less he fancied Tazewell Farris. He was up at dawn the next day and, after a bite, he saddled a powerful slate-colored mustang with Pirie's pie slice on it, one of Bunton's string. He set out and followed faint tracks left by Farris and his companions.

The sun was rising on his left hand when he sighted gray smoke. He moved along a wooded ridge over the valley as he worked in toward it. Dismounting, he went on afoot and before long was observing Farris, Chuckwalla Deets and the others hard at work. They had a fire going and he watched the same rigmarole with a hand-operated bellows, tongs and hammer that Easy had seen, though Ab could not know it. He was some distance away and as they squatted around in a circle they cut off his vision.

"But if that's bug-huntin' then I'm a lady's dressmaker!" he concluded.

After what had happened to Naylor he would not approach alone. He decided to report to Pirie and let the boss decide what to do. He drew off, picked up his horse, and took a short-cut for home along a narrow, winding cattle trail in the woods.

This finally brought him to cleared range. He heard a cow bellowing as he

broke out of the brush and saw another smoke plume coming from behind a rise capped with rocks. As he swung up this below him was a sight he instantly recognized. A bunch of Pie steers were being held in the natural depression by mounted men. A couple on foot near the first were busily smearing the brand with running-irons as an animal was roped, thrown and tied.

The outlaws whom Farris had reported seeing! Ab knew this at once. About twenty of them, Negroes and whites, were down there and they were heavily armed, bearded and, for the most part, fierce. Some wore Mexican regalia—peaked sombreros, tight-fitting velvet trousers and jackets.

Others wore leather or thick cloth garb, and Stetsons.

Bunton ducked back, swerving his horse before he was seen. Farris's story was corroborated. Rustlers were on the range. He was rather confused at this because he had decided simply from his hunch and what he had seen earlier that Farris had been lying concerning the outlaws.

The first thing to do was get away from there for the cattle thieves would kill him if they could. If Easy Naylor had run upon such dangerous customers while they were at work they would have shot him, and that might explain Naylor's death.

Bunton believed he had made it when five more rustlers issued from behind a patch of woods, driving before them a bunch of Pie steers toward the branding fire. They sighted him just as he did them. Bunton dug in his spurs and the slate-colored mustang sprang forward in a violent lunge, swaying from side to side.

Hoarse yells ordered him to halt, but Bunton only settled low over his horse and rode for life.

They opened fire and he galloped at an angle past the bobbing longhorns. The trotting cows unwittingly assisted him for they were betwen Bunton and the quintet of gunslingers. The outlaws had to jerk rein and circle the steers before they could come straight at him.

Whooping it up, they were calling for the others and trying for him with Colt and carbine.

Some lead came painfully close to the fleeing cowboy.

BUNTON glanced back. The whole shebang had come tearing out of the draw on his trail, spurring and quirting to overtake him, with the five who had first sighted him two hundred yards in front of the main party. Dust spurts told where bullets plugged into the dirt on both sides of the driving mustang and Bunton heard the ominous whines in the warm air as volley after volley roared from rustler guns. Those men were savagely determined to bring him down, for they knew he would give away their game.

Bunton drew a Colt, cocked it and again glanced back over his shoulder. From the main crew a horseman had forged ahead, was coming up with the van. His tall, blooded Arizona blue gelding was far superior to the usual plains mustang. On a high-cantled, hand-carved saddle whose hammered silver trappings glinted in the sunlight sat a commanding figure in leather, a sandy Stetson flapping over large red ears which stood out at right angles to his long head. He was quirting with a rawhide and raking his horse with the six-inch rowels of Mexican spurs. Bunton could make out the smudge of a black mustache against the bronzed face.

"By Jupe, he looks like Rawhide Arbuckle!" he muttered.

"Rawhide" Arbuckle was a tough character who had fled Lampases after a hold-up and shooting. Bunton knew much of his exploits and once someone had pointed out Rawhide in a saloon where Bunton had paused for a drink.

His quick thought was rudely cut off as something slashed his left arm over the elbow. It stung frightfully and drove the power from him. Confused, he slacked rein and the slaty mustang veered, losing several yards.

Bunton bit his lip, pulling himself together, and the next moment he was riding as he had never ridden before, aware that one of the many bullets coming at him had bitten his flesh. He felt blood in his shirt sleve.

Swinging, he fired twice at Rawhide Arbuckle who was now out ahead of his men. Then he gave all his attention to riding.

They ran him for miles, all the way home. Within a few hundred yards of the Pie the lathered mustang under Bunton

faltered. He had been hit. Bunton kicked his toes free and jumped as the slate-hued horse stumbled and fell.

He landed running, the breath burning his heaving lungs.

CHAPTER III

Dangerous Calling

IN THE bright morning Austin nestled in her ampitheater of hills, beyond which rose the blue Colorado range. The city spread over a sequence of low rises and wide terraces, with higher reaches stretching northwest along the Colorado River, which here made a graceful curve. Usually docile, the Colorado's deep, scarred banks reminded what its flood-waters could do when they came raging from upstream.

This was the political heart of Texas. The stately community's life revolved about the capitol, which stood out, with the Governor's mansion and land office, over the homes and business blocks. Congress Avenue split the city asunder. It was the principal commercial street, a broad way lined with shade trees and imposing public edifices, schools and churches set in spacious grounds. Brick and stone predominated.

The Houston & Texas Central Railway served the capital. East and west Texas met here to compromise and trade, the wild hunter of the plains and the shrewd operator from the coast brushing elbows in the streets and saloons.

Close to the pulsing heart of the mighty Lone Star empire was the office of Captain William McDowell, chief of Texas Rangers. Responsible for law and order in a huge chunk of territory, McDowell commanded a comparatively few officers for his formidable task, but it was said that each of his Rangers was as good as a troop.

Too old to ride the brutally hard trails now, McDowell thought and schemed in his den, a man especially fitted for the monumental task that was his. For he knew the state from earlier days when he had possessed the tremendous physical power needed in the field. He was familiar with the habits and methods of law-breakers against whom he relentlessly warred.

McDowell was as gnarled as an ancient oak, and his inner fiber was just as tough.

"There's many ways to kill a dog without chokin' him on butter," he growled aloud this day, as he sat waiting in his office. "Hatfield's the hombre for this job. It's mighty dangerous and it smells complicated."

He had already roared to his aide in the outer office to send in his star operative, Jim Hatfield. McDowell turned to greet the Ranger as his soft step announced his arrival.

McDowell stood around six feet, but he had to look up into the gray-green, long-lashed eyes of the man who entered his office. To the old captain, as to others, the sight of Hatfield was a soothing one, for he immediately impressed the beholder with his physical and mental power. His broad shoulders tapered to slim hips where his twin revolvers rode in supple holsters. His black hair shone with the perfection acquired only by youth and health. His wide mouth relieved the ruggedness of his strong face.

Rangers wore no uniform. So Jim Hatfield was attired in whipcord riding trousers, a crisp brown shirt, and a bandanna. A Stetson was canted on his head, the strap loose in the butternut runner. In a secret pocket reposed the silver star on silver circle, badge of his calling. He did not wear it openely at all times, since he preferred to look over an explosive situation and decide on how to strike before announcing himself.

Hatfield was the type of man to whom anxious people instinctively drew to for leadership and aid in times of stress. McDowell knew this, as he knew the big officer's pantherish fighting qualities, and that Hatfield could match his physical genius with the cunning of a master strategist.

"Take the load off yore spurs and roll a quirly," ordered the captain. "We got a nasty mess right in our own back yard, Jim. Up the river, no more than a long day's ride." He pointed to the large map tacked on the wall, tracing the Colorado's course with a bent forefinger. "Here's Marble Falls, thirty miles south of Lampasas. Yuh've heard of Rawhide Ken Arbuckle?"

Hatfield nodded, waiting for the gist of what was in his superior's mind.

"The Rangers want Arbuckle," the old captain said with grim emphasis. "He's a rustler and killer. His home port's Lampasas, a tough little nut of a town, but he ain't likely to be caught there. He just flits in and out now and then. From information reachin' headquarters I heard Rawhide is commandin' a powerful band of outlaws, cleanin' out the cattle range south of the river. Complaints have come from Claude Pirie, owner of the Pie Ranch, and from four brothers named Walsh who share the grass and the water of Granite Creek with him. Marble Falls is the nearest wide spot in the road thereabouts. Just below it the river widens and tumbles over a great rock formation. And Granite Mountain ain't far off. They quarry a lot of buildin' stone in those parts.

HATFIELD was listening attentively, making mental notes—the only kind he ever needed—as McDowell went on explaining.

"There's more to it than just the rustlin', Jim. I can't make out exactly what it is, for Pirie don't seem shore himself and only hints at somethin'. Accordin' to him it looks like the old Spanish grant game is bein' pulled on him, for a legal claim has been made to his land. One man has been killed and others wounded, so far. I don't see the connection between the Spanish grant suit and Rawhide Arbuckle's operations, but I smell rats."

McDowell smashed a fist on his desk and the inkwell jumped and nearly overturned.

Hatfield checked over the plea for help in the letter which McDowell handed him to read. Then, without comment, shaking hands with his chief, he sauntered out to the yard and mounted his handsome golden gelding.

McDowell watched from a window, nostalgia for the days forever gone by clutching at him. And in his eyes, as always, was admiration for Goldy, Hatfield's great sorrel, which had the speed and stamina needed to carry McDowell's best officer on his perilous forays. A carbine rode in an oilskin case under Hatfield's long leg and saddle-bags and a roll contained what few articles he needed.

"Come back," muttered the Captain as his star officer rode away. "Texas needs yuh, Jim!"

Reaching a neat cottage on the outskirts of Austin, Jim Hatfield dropped rein. His rap on the front door was answered by a lean lad of sixteen who greeted him with a whoop of joy.

"Hey, Sis!" the boy shouted. "Jim's come for me. We're ridin'."

The lad was "Buck" Robertson, Hatfield's protégé. He was a typical young Texan with his turned-up nose and freckles. The sun had bleached his light hair almost white. On his lanky young body he wore levis and a wool shirt.

"Take it easy, Buck." The Ranger smiled at him. "How soon can yuh be ready to start?"

"Right now!" Buck shouted eagerly. "Just wait till I slap my hull on Old Heart Seven!" He dashed from the house, headed for the stable.

A charming young woman with amber eyes and golden hair came into the room to greet the visitor.

"Jim!" she exclaimed. "I'm happy to see you."

"Anita!" Hatfield took both her hands. "Hope yuh don't mind if I take Buck along for a little jaunt."

"No," she said. "It's good for him. You know how I trust you."

Hatfield had helped the Robertsons down on the Brazos during a time of trouble, and they had become fast friends. Anita, a schoolteacher, had taken care of her brother since the loss of their parents, but she was a clever girl and realized Buck's need of a strong man's guidance. Her brother loved danger, and running with the Ranger offered an outlet for his high spirits, as well as keeping him on the right track and setting him a good example. Whenever possible Hatfield let Buck Robertson ride with him.

Anita insisted they eat a hot meal before starting. While they were at the table she packed a change of clothes for Buck. As Hatfield and Buck rode off later she stood on the porch and waved to them. They headed for the west river road, Hatfield on the sheening sorrel and Buck on his chunky gray mustang which wore a brand in the form of a heart around the figure 7. . . .

Late in the afternoon of the following

day, Jim Hatfield and Buck Robertson rode across a rolling range south of the Colorado.

"Mighty handsome country, Buck," murmured the Ranger.

They were in the central mountain region, with mountains of granite in the distance, their slopes covered by matted forests of cedar and other growth.

"That'll be Granite Creek, I reckon," observed Buck, indicating a stream ahead of them.

"Yeah. This must be Pie range on this side. Good grass. Yuh can see they've worked mighty hard to keep this spread in shape. Watch out for that soft spot!"

Buck swerved Old Heart Seven. Hatfield glanced back at the round depression from which wind and rain had shifted loose dirt and gravel.

"Looks like somebody had drilled a hole and filled her in," he remarked, but thought little of it.

But farther on he pointed out several more such spots. They were not in line as would have been the case had they been dug for fence pots, and there seemed no reason for them.

IN THE distance they noted small bunches of cattle which must belong to the Pie, for at Marble Falls they had made inquiries and learned the location of Claude Pirie's range and home. Aware that "Rawhide" Ken Arbuckle was operating some where in the vicinity with his rustlers, Hatfield kept on eye peeled for possible enemies, alert as he always was.

The sun finally dropped behind the dark west mountains.

"We still got a few miles to go, Buck," Hatfield observed. "I could do with a real meal."

"Me too," grunted Buck.

Night fell, but Hatfield had by then taken his bearings. Pirie's ranchhouse was back a mile or so from Granite Creek and he was sure he would see the lights and be able to locate the ranch. They rode on in silence for half an hour, then suddenly Buck sang out:

"Look at that!"

Hatfield was already staring at an increasing red glow ahead. At first he had thought it a bonfire but it had grown too large for this.

"Mebbe a barn or haystack," he muttered uneasily, realizing that the brisk night breeze at their backs would fan the flames.

They urged the horses to greater speed. Coming over a rise they saw the Pie buildings before them. The surrounding area showed plainly in the ruby illumination and, closer in, they heard roaring guns.

"Why, the main house is burnin'!" Buck cried in excited dismay.

The roof and upper walls of the big ranchhouse were being swept by dancing flames. Men on horses or afoot were in sight, but they were not fighting the fire. They were throwing lead at whoever was behind the long bunkhouse.

"Hold back, Buck!" ordered Hatfield. "This looks bad." To ride into such a battle could spell quick death. It was vital to find out what this was all about before taking a hand. "Come on! We'll move over to that patch of woods on the east."

Fortunately they had not been sighted, so taking advantage of contours in the ground they reached a spot from which they could see more without exposing themselves.

Guns flamed, their heavy volleys and the shouts of angry fighting men making a din in the night.

CHAPTER IV

Refuge

JIM HATFIELD dropped rein and, followed by Buck, crept through the low brush, hidden in its shadows. Flaming sparks carried on the wind threatened to catch the bunkhouse roof and dry patches of grass and chaparral. The shrieks of fear-paralyzed horses added to the horror.

"Buck!" said Hatfield in a low voice. "See that big hombre with the ears, on the Arizona blue? I'll guarantee that's Rawhide Arbuckle!"

The chief of the rustlers had come riding around in their direction, trailed by a score of his armed cohorts. It was as bright as day in the clearing around the house, and they could make out Rawhide's bony figure, the oversized ears standing at right angles under his hat, the black smudge of his mustache. Arbuckle had pistols in his

hands and was carrying a shotgun across his pommel.

The rustler leader and his men dug in their spurs, picking up sped as they swept in a wide circle toward the rear of the bunkhouse. A blond, hatless Texas giant jumped from the end of the long shed and began firing his Colt at the enemy.

Hatfield heard his roar of warning:

"Pirie! Here they come, this way!"

Someone shouted a reply from behind the bunkhouse.

"Keep back, Bunton! They'll sieve yuh."

Not the slightest shred of doubt was left in Hatfield's mind now. Rawhide Arbuckle had attacked the Pie, had driven out the owners, and set the house on fire. He was now attempting to finish off his victims.

"We'll have to jump into this pronto, Buck!" warned Hatfield.

Through drifting smoke he sighted a second line of rustlers headed for the other end of the bunkhouse. Arbuckle was making a determined effort to encircle the defenders and wipe them out.

A few shots came from either end of the long shed. The slight resistance Pirie was making surprised and worried the Ranger. Such a large ranch should have more fighting men.

"I hope they ain't taken the women prisoners," he thought worriedly as on the spur of the moment he rapidly threw together some sort of plan to delay Rawhide Arbuckle. Perhaps, he thought, the Pie had lost many men in the first fury of the attack.

"Open up, Buck!" he said, nudging his youthful comrade.

Buck had his carbine ready. He was an excellent marksman, since he was a pupil of the Ranger's. Flat on the earth, hidden in the brush patch, and partially protected by granite rocks cropping from the soil, Hatfield and Buck both pulled triggers.

They tried for Rawhide Arbuckle who jumped in his saddle and veered his horse. Rustlers piled up around their leader at this unexpected, smashing counter attack. One of them yelped and clutched at his shoulder which had been stung by Ranger lead. Another's mustang stumbled and went down, the rider jumping off. The hot metal poured from the brush slowed and checked the attack, for Arbuckle could not run betwen Hatfield and the bunkhouse without subjecting his men to the withering enfilading fire of the surprise defenders.

This did not go unnoticed by Pirie, Bunton and the handful of cowboys behind the bunkhouse.

"Who's over there?" a sharp voice called. "I'm Pirie!"

"Friends, Pirie!" bellowed the Ranger, to be heard over the din. "We're joinin' yuh. Dont fire on us!"

"Come ahead! But yuh're askin' for death." Claude Pirie's tone was grim.

Rawhide Arbuckle had quickly sized up the situation. He had pulled his powerful mount around and was galloping at full speed, followed by his rustlers, to make an even wider arc skirting the clump in which Hatfield and Buck were concealed. The two had a few minutes in which to reach their horses, mount, and race to the rear of the bunkhouse.

Only half a dozen desperate men were there, with their saddled horses over behind a stable. One was the blond giant Bunton, Colt in hand, face smudged by smoke and dirt. Another was a slight, determined fellow with salted black hair and a close-cropped mustache—Claude Pirie. The rest were Pie cowboys.

"Come on—run for it, Pirie!" ordered the Ranger insistently. "No time to lose!" Half of 'em are comin' on one side, and in a jiffy Rawhide Arbuckle will be around this way."

A COWBOY watching at the far end yelled a warning and began firing.

"Who are you?" demanded Pirie. Overwrought as he was, he feared the arrival of the Ranger might be an enemy trick to disarm the Pie defenders.

"Tell yuh when we're out of this ruckus. Move! No time to lose, I tell yuh!"

"Hit leather, boys!" Pirie snapped. "Let's ride."

The wind puffed erratically, whirling choking, eye-smarting smoke over them. One of the rustler groups had come snaking into position and the handful of fugitives reeled before their stunning attack. They barely were able to make their horses, jump to their saddles and whirl off.

That second closing wing, led by Rawhide Arbuckle, had been delayed by Hatfield and Buck, and these few breaths of time made it possible for Pirie to get going. The Pie contingent rushed into the

darkness, away from the blazing house.

Yells of fury and searching bullets followed them as they settled to it, trying to get away from there. The rustler columns joined and, with Rawhide urging his killers on, set out after the running Pirie and his men. But the rustlers were framed against the red glow for the snarling guns of the Ranger and Pirie, holding the rear.

But in spite of the damage done to the rustlers Rawhide Arbuckle kept coming for nearly two miles, intent on wiping out the Pie survivors. But more of his gunhands had dropped behind, lost in the shuffle. Their mustangs either were unequal to the swift pace, or the riders did not like the singing metal coming back at them.

Pirie and the Ranger were close together and several jumps behind the others.

"A squally evenin'!" panted Hatfield. "Any safe spot to head for?"

The smallish, wiry Pirie on his strawberry roan was one of the best horsemen Hatfield had ever seen. He glanced sideward at the rugged Ranger who loomed up with substantial and comforting power.

"Yuh're the saltiest hombre I ever hope to meet, suh," replied Pirie. "And shorely the finest offhand shot with a Colt. I believe they'd have downed us if yuh hadn't chanced along."

In spite of his words of gratitude to the stranger for the help given Hatfield felt the reserve in the rancher's manner. And he realized that Pirie wanted to know just who he was.

"I'm from Austin, suh. McDowell had yore message. Jim Hatfield's my handle. The young hombre with me is Buck Robertson, who gives me a hand."

"Texas Ranger!" Pirie grinned broadly, and with relief. "I'm mighty glad yuh've got here, Ranger. Right now our best bet is to head for the Square Four. It belongs to my friends and neighbors, the Walsh brothers."

"Where's yore family and the rest of yore boys?"

"Already on the way there. A few of us stuck behind to keep Rawhide and his crew busy."

"I savvy."

Pirie, Bunton and that handful of cowboys had deliberately thrown themselves into the breach in order that the others might gain time to escape.

Several toughs who had not given up the chase pelted forward, howling and shooting. The dogged, retreating Pie and the Ranger fought back savagely.

"Make for Granite Creek!" yelled Pirie, after they had smashed the latest foray.

They turned down a long, gentle slope, and crossed Granite Creek where the stream widened and shallowed. A chunk of yellow moon and myriad stars burned in the heavens, while behind them a ruby glow marked the site of Pirie's burning home.

Rawhide Ken Arbuckle and a score of raiders still kept trailing them. But it had settled down to a long chase. The mustangs were lathered and slowing after the first streaking dashes. Occasionally a carbine snapped from one side or the other.

PIRIE and Hatfield rode together, talking when they could as they rode. Bunton and Buck, the cowboys, shoved along ahead.

"This is Square 4 range," remarked Pirie. He had control of his voice but he was badly shaken. "I hope my wife and the kids have reached Walsh's by now. They had eight of the boys as guards."

"How did yuh manage to get 'em out?"

"It was thanks to Ab Bunton. We knew that Rawhide Arbuckle was around. Bunton had run into the rustlers and they chased him home, pinked his arm and killed his hoss just as he made it. I still don't savvy why Rawhide burned us out. What's he got to gain by it? They had coal-oil with 'em and tossed flamin brands onto the roof after dark fell.

"I'm no cold-footer but when I realized we were goin' to be smoked out, women, kids and all, right into Rawhide's hands, I lost my gall. Bunton took a few men and charged right out at 'em. He drove 'em back and I was able to get my family into the yard, while others saddled up. Rawhide had circled us, his men spread out. Bunton smashed through and they all hustled to concentrate on him. This won a few minutes so I could get the folks started. Then some of us stuck behind the bunkhouse to delay pursuit."

At last they sighted lights on the valley rim.

"The Square Four!" said Pirie.

Buck Robertson, forging ahead with Ab

Bunton, called:

"Riders comin'—a bunch of 'em."

The approaching horsemen challenged.

"Square Four!" called Pirie. "Is that you, Jerry?"

They were cowboys from the Walsh home base, led by one of the four brothers.

"Yore wife and the kids just pulled in, Claude," said Jerry Walsh. "We were comin' over to give yuh a hand."

These reinforcements discouraged Rawhide Arbuckle. The rustlers stopped, sending a few ineffectual shots at long range. When Jerry Walsh and his men made a stab at them the outlaws swung and rode off.

The Square 4 was a refuge for the battered, weary fighters. They dropped rein in a wide yard, where four houses were close together. Lanterns burned on gate posts, and inside the house oil lamps blazed. There were plenty of friendly hands to help Pirie.

They had managed to save their lives and for this they were grateful. But in the distance the sky was blood-red from the burning ruins of Claude Pirie's home.

CHAPTER V

An Offer

PIRIE rushed to reassure his anxious wife, his children and friends, and Hatfield was introduced.

They had all gathered in Jerry Walsh's neat home. He was thirty and eldest of the four brothers.

Although varying somewhat in height and size, the Walshes all were of the same wide, stocky build and had broad, good-natured faces. Dave, next in age to Jerry, was a bit taller than the others. Lew had a white scar on his left cheek from some long-past accident. Ike was the youngest. His hair was thick and he had grown sideburns as an expression of individuality. Jerry's brown hair was thinning. All four of the brothers wore range clothes, leather or whipcord pants, wool shirts, big hats and spurred boots.

The Walsh boys were married, had families, and were working hard to improve the ranch they held together. The Ranger found that they looked up to Pirie, and learned that the older rancher had helped them to pioneer their range and get settled.

The Walsh brothers shared the work, and the blood tie was strong between them.

The young Texas giant, Ab Bunton, came in and Lara Pirie hurried to him. She was a slim, dark-haired girl with violet eyes lighting her vivid face. The two were plainly in love.

The Pirie boys, Claude and Tim, began racing around the room with some of the Walsh children. The little ones were excited and aware that something unusual was going on, but they did not realize the dread experienced by their elders.

The women fixed hot coffee and a meal for the tired fugitives. The children were finally herded to bed while Jim Hatfield sat down for a serious talk with Pirie and the Walshes.

"Mighty sorry I pulled in too late to help yuh save yore house, Pirie," said the Ranger. "But at least yuh're alive and kickin'. I'd like to hear yore side of it all the way, as yuh see it."

Pirie told him the story, with the Walsh brothers nodding or injecting a remark now and then to corroborate what the owner of the Pie said. Pirie told how Bunton had found the body of his partner, Easy Naylor, and of the fight Bunton had made against Rawhide Arbuckle's rustlers.

"Bunton just did make it that day." Pirie shook his head sadly. "There were enough of us around the place to drive Rawhide off. We savvied he was in the vicinity but never believed he'd burn us out thataway." Pirie plainly was feeling the shock of what had occurred.

"Yuh mentioned an old Spanish grant claim, in yore complaint to headquarters," prodded Hatfield. "Who's after yore range?"

"I ain't certain." Pirie brushed his brow with the back of his hand. "A firm of lawyers in Austin sent a notice to me and the Walshes." He gave the name of the lawyers. "We done wrote old Judge Royal to take care of our side when it come up in the courts at Austin. Our titles are good, but it will cost us money and time."

Hatfield had heard of the attorneys re-

presenting the claimants who hid their identities behind a company name.

"Those hombres are land sharks," he declared, and nodded.

Ab Bunton, who had been listening chimed in.

"Boss, I don't cotton to that Tazewell Farris. That bug hunter is hooked into all this somehow. I'm plumb shore of it."

Hatfield's quick query elicted the story of the self-styled entomologist and Chuckwalla Deets. Bunton told how he had crept up and observed Farris drilling holes in the earth.

"I saw a few of those bore holes," said the Ranger. "They'd been filled in loose-like."

He believed that Bunton probably was right in his guess that Farris was connected with the deadly trouble which had struck the range. But he would need to scout carefully in order to get the situation straight.

They were all worn out, and soon turned in. Cowboy sentries were posted by the Walshes around the little collection of buildings making up the Square 4. . . .

Hatfield had just finished an early breakfast set before him by Lara Pirie. He was out in the yard, rolling a quirly, when a Square 4 man called out a warning. Riders were approaching.

Ab Bunton, Pirie, Jerry Walsh and others stood waiting as the horsemen came slowly in.

"It ain't the rustlers," said Bunton, whose eyesight was extraordinarily keen. "Gents, it's the bug hunter and his bunch."

Hatfield turned to Claude Pirie. "I aim to stay out of things till I find out what's what so don't mention me. I'd like to get a look at Farris and to hear what he has to say. I'll go inside and wait near that open window. You stand by it with Farris . . . Come along, Buck."

HE DID not want Buck to be seen, either, for sometimes he could use his youthful aide as a check on the enemy. They slipped through a side door into Jerry's house.

After a short wait he saw the eight riders pulling up and waving a greeting, singing out to the Square 4. Walsh and Pirie signaled them to come in.

A long-bodied, lean man in black pants and a white shirt led the party. He dismounted and strolled up to Pirie, mopping his lobster-red face with a large silk kerchief.

"Hunh-hunh!" He cleared his throat and sniffled. "Going to be a scorcher, gentlemen. Don't you think so?" A smile flitted across his crimson countenance.

"Mornin', Perfessor Farris," drawled Claude Pirie.

The Ranger studied Farris. High cheekbones, a long, narrow nose, pale-brown eyes. Farris had a stuffy manner yet his words were soft, almost fawning as he spoke to the ranchers.

A plump, dark-haired, dark-skinned ball-waisted man in corduroys and high boots stepped up behind Farris. He seemed nervous. Hatfield decided, from what he had been told, that he must be Chuckwalla Deets, Farris' Man Friday.

The rest of Farris' party stayed by their horses, smoking as they waited. They were armed and resolute in manner, but well-behaved.

"How delighted and relieved I am to find you safe, sir," gushed Farris to Pirie. "I've been sincerely worried about you. Last night we sighted a great fire we thought must be your home and when we arrived there this morning found it a smoking, gutted ruins. I feared you might have perished in the flames. Is your family all right?"

"Fine, Perfessor. But we just got out in the nick."

"So glad. I hold you in the highest esteem, as you must know. Hunh--hunh! How did it start?"

"Rawhide Arbuckle's rustlers attacked and burned us out."

"Awful, awful!" moaned Farris. "Is there no law in this brutal land? My dear Mr. Pirie, no doubt you'll want to move your loved ones to a safer place. I can't blame you. We've had to dodge outlaws constantly ourselves as we have moved about. How can I help you? Hunh-hunh! I have it! I believe I could find a buyer for your lands. I've noted granite outcrops and this can be used for building stone. A few thousands would help you settle elsewhere. You could drive what cattle the thieves have left along with you."

"Gracias." Farris feigned not to notice the irony in Pirie's voce. "I aim to stick here till yuh can ice-skate below," Perfessor. That's that."

"Hunh-hunh." After a blink Farris said, "I admire your blind courage, sir. Personally I'll be only too happy to leave this blighted range. My collection of local insects is nearly complete."

"How yuh made out?" asked Jerry Walsh curiously.

"Splendidly. Hunh-hunh. Let me show you."

Farris went to fetch the specimen cases attached to his gear. He opened one for the benefit of the audience, beaming with pride as the light gleamed on varnished insects impaled on long pins stuck into cork linings. "Where did yuh dig them up?" asked Ab Bunton slyly.

Farris gave the cowboy a quick glance. "Many species of ants, beetles and termites live underground, sir. For these we had to excavate. Is that what you mean?"

"I reckon." Bunton shrugged.

"Stay for chow, Perfessor," invited Jerry Walsh.

"Thank you kindly, but we must move along. I've almost exhausted this region. Mr. Pirie, if you change your mind about accepting my offer you can get in touch with me by sending a messenger to El Tigre Hotel at Marble Falls. Later I may stop at the Keystone in Lampasas, sorting and cataloguing my specimens. Hunh-hunh. Good day, gentlemen."

That humorless smile flicked over his red face as Farris nodded and turned away, trailed by the trotting, obedient Chuckwalla.

THEY rode south toward the cedar-clad heights, the strange Farris in the lead.

"Well, Ranger?" asked Claude Pirie, swinging to the tall officer who had come to stand in the open window. "What yuh figger? Ain't he a funny sidewinder?"

"He made yuh an offer. I aim to find what he's after. Mealy-mouthed, ain't he? Does he always gab like that?"

"Far as I savvy."

"I guess you folks are safe here for the time bein'. I need a look-see at yore land in general and mebbe I can get some idea of what Farris is after. It appears to me the bug huntin' may be a dodge to cover what he's really up to."

"That's what I say." Ab Bunton nodded vigorously. "The cuss has drilled bore holes all across our range."

Hatfield turned to Jerry Walsh. "Yuh got a forge here?"

"Shore. If yore hoss needs shoein' just say the word."

"It ain't that. I need a hand bellows, for one thing. Yuh see, I studied minin' engineerin' before joinin' the Rangers. I got an idea I can smell out what Farris is doin'."

Walsh was able to equip him with what he required—a portable bellows, a short-handled shovel, a square of screening wire and a hammer.

Saddling the horses, Hatfield and Buck prepared to ride.

"Keep guards out night and day," warned the Ranger. "If Arbuckle tried for yuh once, Pirie, he may again."

The two shoved off northwest from the Square 4. Dense brush grew where the land had not been cleared and giant granite spires loomed over rising heights dark with cedar stands. There would be

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plenty of hiding places in such tangled fastnesses.

As they jogged along in the mounting heat they sighted bunches of cattle bearing the Walsh's square four. The country seemed peaceful and entirely deserted save for animals. Birds were winging here and there in an intensely blue sky. It was difficult to realize that a sinister threat of death hung over the inhabitants of such a land.

Aware of Rawhide Arbuckle's presence in the vicinity, Hatfield and Buck watched carefully as they moved on. A road runner darted from a clump of bush and ran swiftly just ahead of Old Heart 7, Buck's gray. The long-legged bird, its plumage comically ruffled, seemed to be challenging the youth to a race. Buck chuckled at the chaparral cock's antics.

"Look at him go, Jim!! cried Buck, urging Old Heart 7 to a faster pace.

The road runner picked up speed and for a time stayed in front of them. When the bird tired of the sport he swerved and disappeared in another thicket.

Some miles from the Square 4 home site Hatfield slowed and pointed.

"There's another of Farris's bore holes, Buck."

They turned westerly and after a while spied more of the roundish little depressions. The holes had been roughly filled in by returning the materials taken from each one.

Hatfield observed a series of circular core marks. They were not in close line though they occurred on a crosscut section of the Square 4 just as they had on the Pie. At last he drew up and dismounted beside one. Buck dropped off his gray.

"Here we go, Buck," said the Ranger. "Pick up some of that dead wood over there and start a fire."

CHAPTER VI

Chase

WHILE Buck Robertson was lighting a blaze Hatfield set out his tools. Taking the short-handled shovel, he dug into one of the loosely tamped holes. Cleaning it out he was able to slice off several chunks of dark-gray substance from the bottom of the bore.

Buck stared with a boy's fascinated curiosity as the Ranger worked. The fire crackled and blazed high and the dry wood gave off little smoke.

Blue and green tarnish streaked some of the lumps. Hatfield sifted a couple of shovelfuls through the square of wire screening he had borrowed from Jerry Walsh. He discarded extraneous sand, dirt and pebbles.

Rising then, the Ranger kicked a long stick out of the fire. It had burned through at one end.

"What's that for, Jim?" asked Buck.

"We need a little charcoal."

He collected a quantity of the lead-gray stuff in the shovel blade and pounded it fine with the hammer. Then he shaved charcoal from the faggot into the mixture.

"Fetch the bellows," he ordered.

Buck worked the blower, fanning the heart of the coals, while Hatfield gripped the shovel's handle and held the blade in the most intense heat. Sparks sung the hands and faces of both of them but they kept at it, coughing from the smoke and hot dust raised by the air blasts. Blue-green jets flashed here and there.

At last the Ranger seemed satisfied with his strange cookery. He pulled out the smoking shovel and placed it on a flat rock to cool off. Rolling a quirly, he took a deep breath.

Resuming work then, Hatfield separated the mass from the shovel blade with the point of his long knife. It was still blazing hot and he tried cooling it with water from a canteen. The flat rock top served as a table as he squatted before it. Buck licked his lips, consumed with interest.

"Let's have the hammer, Buck," the Ranger said.

He had found something like a small red button and he began pounding this. It flattened out under his blows.

"So that's it," he drawled.

"What is it—what is it?" demanded Buck excitedly.

Hatfield smiled. "Let's pick up, then I'll explain it to yuh step by step."

In the south sky a flock of birds veered and winged off, startled by something below them. The Ranger and Buck had picked up the bellows and hammer, fastening them to the saddle with rawhide loops,

when a hoarse shout and a gunshot rang out.

They had been so engrossed in what they were doing that they had missed the tiny signs of warning they might otherwise have noted. Over the brush-fringed rise appeared a line of riders, one of whom had sighted them and opened fire.

"Scamper!" cried Hatfield. "It's Rawhide Arbuckle and his bunch!"

The rustlers must have seen their smoke and come to investigate. They were still at long range, for which Hatfield was grateful. Buck was already on his gray mustang and the tall officer hit leather without touching iron, following his youthful friend as Buck set Old Heart 7 to the run.

More and more outlaws hove into view. They roared after the two who were forced northward toward the Colorado. Carbine bullets kicked up spurts of dust or sang over their lowered heads as they rode for life.

They flew over the grassy land, skirting rocks and patches of chaparral. The enemy was between them and the Square 4, and in the daylight Hatfield and Buck could only trust to their horses to save them.

The line of outlaws spread across a wide front while some forged ahead, among them Rawhide Arbuckle on his fine blue Arizona gelding. The gunslingers apparently were hoping for a slip. If Old Heart 7 or Goldy hit a concealed soft spot and went down, if either horse slacked off the grueling pace, the fugitives would be run over and captured, if not shot. The fact that they had run was enough for Rawhide, who was determined to overtake them.

Buck was as light as a jockey and his chunky gray could really move when he had to. Only Arbuckle's horse seemed able to maintain the distance, and a couple of whizzing slugs from a Ranger Colt kept the rustler chief from coming up alone.

THE CHASE ran on and on, but after an hour of this it became obvious that the two fleeing men were on superior mounts. They were gaining more and more on the pursuers. Arbuckle's men were strung out for a mile behind him.

"We ain't far from the Colorado," panted Hatfield. "I s'pose Rawhide hopes to pin us there."

He began bearing more to the west so they would not come up suddenly on the river and be cut off. After another thirty minutes of the losing pursuit, Rawhide Arbuckle pulled up and turned his band.

The sorrel and the gray mustang needed a breather. They were damp from the hard gallop and the sun was intensely hot.

Hatfield and Buck dismounted and led the animals to a hilltop where some large trees promised a patch of shade in which to cool off and rest. From there they could see the Colorado, and in the disatnce northeastward a plume of smoke.

"That must be Marble Falls," said Hatfield, reaching for his tobacco pouch and cigarette papers.

"How we goin' to get back to Walsh's?" asked Buck. "That bunch will be watchin' for us, Jim."

"Yuh're right. I guess we wait till it's dark. I'd enjoy a siesta. We'll take turns, one can stay on watch."

Late that afternoon Buck touched the dozing Ranger who was instantly awake and alert.

"There's a few riders headin' north for the river, Jim. I don't believe they've spotted us."

Hatfield unshipped his field-glasses and focused them on the moving, distant figures.

"By Jupe, Buck, it's Farris and his men. Looks like they're goin' to Marble Falls." He was glad now that they had stopped at the settlement on their way to the Pie Ranch for he knew the lay of the land there now. "It may be worth a fling if we sneak in and do a little eyeballin'. Farris told Pirie he could be found in Marble Falls or Lampasas, and Lampasas is a long ride away. That Farris is just as long as a snake and drags the ground when he walks. Sooner or later we got to tangle with the rascal."

Buck always welcomed a dangerous play, so he nodded eagerly.

They chewed on hardtack and jerked beef strips from their saddle-bags while they waited for dark to fall. When it did they moved down to Granite Creek and made a small fire. Hot coffee was a welcome stimulent.

The horses were sparingly watered and they started north. Reaching the Colorado they could see the oil lamps glowing in

Marble Falls. The place nestled in cedar hills . Granite Mountain seemed to loom right over the settlement, although it was two miles distant.

They crossed the big river. South of Marble Falls the Colorado widened, to tumble over immense rock formations. The gravel road wound up to the town and on through it to Lampasas, thirty miles away, a larger, wilder and woolier town.

Knowing that Tazewell Farris and his crew were probably in the town they pulled up and looked for signs of the men. Along the main street, which widened to the typical plaza of a Texas community, were buildings of granite blocks from the nearby mountains. Others were of cedar.

"They run to quarryin' in these parts," remarked the Ranger. "Sell a lot of cedar posts for fences and such, too." In a few moments he pulled up and spoke in a low voice. "I'll wait in the shadow and watch, Buck. You slip into the saloon and see can yuh spot Farris and Chuckwalla."

Under Hatfield's tutelage Buck was fast becoming a skilled observer. It was advantageous, too, that a youth could move about unchallenged where an older man might arouse hostile suspicion.

The main oasis was called *"El Tigre,"* according to the sign in front of the square structure built of granite blocks. Hanging lamps brightly lighted the interior and an accordion made music for drinkers at the bar or tables. On the second floor were rooms to be rented to the public.

Hatfield dismounted and stood under the spreading limbs of a huge live-oak, holding Old Heart 7's rein while Buck skipped across the dusty road and entered the Tiger saloon.

HALF an hour later Buck rejoined his tall friend.

"They're here," he reported. "Farris and Chuckwalla just finished supper in a back room. Their gunhands are in the bar. I got up under a side winder and heard some of Farris' talk. Chuckwalla claimed he was worried, and Farris called him a fool. Then Chuckwalla said he'd be glad when his helper came along. It seems Rawhide Arbuckle has promised to send him a man who savvies minin' and is also fast with a gun."

"That's interestin'. I might learn a lot from Chuckwalla and his boss if they thought I was Rawhide's pard. Where are they now?"

"Well, Chuckwalla's settled down to a bottle. Farris said he had some papers to look over and was goin' upstairs."

Guided to the open window, Hatfield could look through into the private room where the rotund Chuckwalla Deets was slumped over a table, a quart of whisky in front of him. He was alone and drinking heavily.

The Ranger drew off, determined to take a stab at roping Deets and perhaps Farris, through his assistant. He thought he saw a chance to trick Chuckwalla into a disclosure of Farris' plans. In his gear he carried a pad and paper and he wrote a note which might have been written by such an unschooled type as Rawhide Arbuckle:

Chuckwalla. Meet Big Jim Hale, fastest hombre with a hogleg this side El Paso. Savvies minin to.
Rawhide

Waiting a while for the burning liquor further to befuddle Deets' brain, the Ranger hitched up his gun-belts and stalked into the saloon.

He recognized several of the armed men who traveled with Farris and Chuckwalla. They eyed him as a matter of course, sizing up the tall, rugged figure with the heavy guns and salty look. They eased as he pushed to the bar and rang a silver dollar on the top.

He spoke to the bartender who served him, downed his drink, and turned toward the back of the establishment. This alerted Farris' men and a couple followed him when he went toward the room where Chuckwalla was sitting.

As the Ranger paused in the doorway, Deets glanced up and a startled look came into his eyes. His dark cheeks puffed up and he seemed to swell in alarm, much like the chuckwalla lizard for which he was nicknamed. The Chuckwalla had a habit, when pursued by hungry enemies, of slipping into a crack in the rocks and blowing itself up so it could not be flipped out and eaten.

"Evenin' suh," drawled the Ranger. "Yuh're Mr. Deets, ain't yuh? The barkeep said I'd find yuh here. Rawhide sent me."

"Oh, oh. *Bueno.* Fine. Come in and set

down." Chuckwalla released the air in his lungs in an explosive sigh of relief. "Glad to meet yuh. Yore handle?"

"Hale, suh." Hatfield spoke with soft deference.

The gunslingers were closing in. Chuckwalla saw them as they checked at the open door.

"All right, boys. This galoot is a friend of mine."

CHAPTER VII

Mining Engineer

DEETS' recommendation sent the gunslingers back to the bar. The Ranger pulled up a chair and accepted a drink, then passed the forged introductory letter to Chuckwalla, who unfolded it and held it up to the lamp on the table. His lips worked as he read the message. Hatfield watched closely, in case anything went sour.

"Fine!" Deets exclaimed as he laid the note down. "I asked Rawhide if he savvied anyone who could help me on the job and also fight. Yuh look like yuh'd fill the second bill, if not the first. Yuh know anything about minin' work?"

"Oh shore, suh. What type of ore yuh after?"

Chuckwalla frowned and looked important.

"We'll go into that later. Rawhide wouldn't have sent yuh if yuh wasn't to be trusted, of course. Yuh'll take what orders we give? No matter what they happen to be? And I want yuh to guard me first of all. We got sharpshootin' cowboys to fight in these parts and I don't cotton to that kind of stuff. I get as cold as a well digger in Montana when Colts start poppin'. Ain't my line. I can hit a barn door at ten paces if I'm lucky, that's all."

Hatfield patted one of the heavy revolver butts at his hip.

"My liver regulator is the best yuh'll find, Mr. Deets. I guarantee nobody will beat me to the cure."

Chuckwalla downed another snifter. As a rule he was a silent man, but the whisky loosened his tongue, making him garrrulous. He seemed to find comfort in the confident Hatfield's presence, and his obvious power. He held his gnarled hands before him.

"My fingers are knotted up from shovels, picks and scratchin' dirt. I told the boss I know as much about gunfightin' as a hog does about a sidesaddle but he says I got to see this through. Have a drink."

After a moment's pause, Deets asked suddenly:

"What's a stamp mill for?"

Hatfield knew Chuckwalla was testing him out as to his mining lore. "Well," he replied easily, "usually that's where yuh crush the ore so it can be concentrated."

"That's right. What would yuh say yuh'd do next."

"Depends what yuh're after. But yuh might screen the stuff and separate the waste from the metal or compound. A steam stamp's a big help. Yore concentrate would go on to a smelter. That takes out impurities."

Chuckwalla banged on the table. "Yuh'll do, *amigo*. Come on, I'll interduce yuh to the boss."

He jumped up but was overconfident, and staggered. Hatfield caught his arm and steadied him. Deets braced himself. On his dark skin was a red flush from the whisky he had imbibed. He touched the wall now and then as he walked unevenly through the corridor and grasped the railing of a rear staircase, going up.

Chuckwalla knocked on a closed door and Farris' voice called:

"Who's there?"

"It's me, Boss. I got a new man here. Rawhide sent him."

A bolt rattled and Tazewell Farris opened the door, peering out at them.

"Come in," he said.

A bunk stood aganst a wall, there was a commode and a round table with an oil lamp burning on it. Near the light, papers were spread out. Farris had been working over them.

"Shake with Big Jim Hale," said Chuckwalla. "He's all wool and a yard wide, Boss. Rawhide says he'll fill the bill and I figger so, too. He savvies the work and yuh can look at him and see he's salty."

Farris nodded. "Hunh-hunh! Delighted, sir. My, my, they didn't spare the clay when the moulded you, did they! You

made it quickly. Only this morning we saw Arbuckle and asked him to send us an assistant for Chuckwalla."

Eye to eye, Farris proved almost fawning again, complimentary of speech. He smiled, but there was neither humor nor warmth in it. He cleared his throat, sniffing. Mealy-mouthed as he was outwardly, Farris had a cold-steel core, the Ranger decided.

FARRIS hitched his chair around and this disturbed his white shirt which was unbuttoned at the throat, so that Hatfield glimpsed the butt plate and thong ring of a heavy revolver in a shoulder holster under the man's clothing. Chuckwalla plumped heavily to the bunk while Hatfield perched on a three-legged stool.

"Hunh-hunh! I have a tight little organization, sir." Farris' manner was that of a superior officer orienting a recruit. "I trust my boys and they return the compliment. I pay well. If you're loyal you needn't worry about money. As to your character, Rawhide understands what we need, so you must fit the specifications. Hunh-hunh! Your qualifications as to mining evidently please our friend Chuckwalla. This is important, for you'll be with him constantly. We hope to get into production before too long."

"Yes, suh. Sounds mighty good. I shore hope to make the grade with you and Mr. Deets."

Hatfield had come in cold, chancing it in order to draw a bit closer to Farris and ferret out all the information possible. It was a dangerous game. Chuckwalla might be fearful, but Farris was determined and deadly, and commanded skilled fighters who would not hesitate to shoot. The man had enlisted Rawhide Arbuckle, no doubt to clean out the Pie and the Square 4 ranges. If Farris found out that the tall fellow was a spy he would kill him if possible.

Cool as he played his new part, Hatfield acted the part of a recommended expert reporting on a job. There was nothing to warn Farris that the man he was talking to was on his train, and Hatfield was at ease, relaxed as the bona-fide applicant would have been.

"Most gratifying!" Farris' flitting smile crossed his strange face. "Hunh-hunh!" He placed his fingertips together as though about to play the childish game of "Here's the Church, There's the Steeple," and resumed his lecture.

"Seldom does Mother Nature furnish us with all the essentials for an industry of this type. One, the abundant, clear water of Granite Creek and its tributaries. Two, dumping room for waste products. Three, sufficient elevation for handling the material by gravity. Four, storage room for fuel, and last but not least, accessibility to a railroad."

"I aimed to ask about that last, suh," the Ranger said earnestly. "Yuh'll need a railway spur for this type of ore, if it's to be a big thing. And there ain't even a T.B. and W. in these parts."

"T.B. and W.?"

"Two bulls and a wagon, suh. Just a jokin' way of mentionin' a dinky line, that's all."

"I see." The humorless smile crossed Farris' face. "Hunh-hunh! I have reliable information the Texas Central will be extended to this region. I've already arranged for a spur to the stamp mill site."

"Why, that's great! Yuh've checked the deposits mighty careful, I reckon."

"Yes. They're inexhaustible, and about eighty per cent rich. We've cored across the Pirie and the Walsh lands and couldn't find bottom anywhere."

"Chalcocite, ain't it?"

"Chiefly. Some malachite in spots."

Hatfield's eyes shone. "I can just see that big mill, suh! There's plenty of cheap labor around San Antonio yuh could fetch in, hold in barracks and pay 'em what yuh please. Yuh dig, slide it to yore feed bins by gravity, stamp it, screen it and ship in barrels on yore spur. Just where is yore smelter?"

"It's being set up and equipped now outside Austin."

"Oh, that's just right. I savvy where yuh can pick up soft coal for a song between here and the capital. Yore cars can fetch fuel back and run full both ways. I s'pose steam is the best thing for power."

Chuckwalla Deets chuckled pridefully. He felt a proprietary interest in the tall applicant he had brought to his chief. Farris also was deeply impressed by Hatfield's knowledge and swift comprehension.

"Yes, our stamp mill will be constructed not far from Granite Creek, on land at

present claimed by Claude Pirie. A dam above will furnish plenty of gravity-driven water while stationary steam engines will power the stamps. I hold huge contracts calling for delivery of thousands of tons of bars, cakes and ingots."

WELL-satisfied with his own shrewdness, he boasted a bit of his acumen.

"I guess the thing to do next is get rid of them cowmen," nugged the Ranger.

"You've hit the nail on the head, young man. With Rawhide and his men to help we shouldn't have too much trouble. Pirie has been driven out and a strong blow at the Square Four will finish the business. They'll move out of my way then."

"Those cowboys will fight," growled Chuckwalla.

"Our friend takes things too hard," said Farris. "He's a fine production engineer, however. There is some danger at present, but you don't look easily frightened. Hunh-hunh."

Hatfield patted a Colt. "I can take care of myself, suh. And nobody will harm Mr. Deets while I'm around."

"That's the talk," applauded Deets. "Say, did Rawhide show yuh his hideout on the Walshes' range?"

"Not yet," replied the Ranger. "Wasn't time. I thought I better hustle right over to see yuh."

"It's the slickest I ever see," declared Chuckwalla. "Yuh'd never find it unless yuh was led in. They can disappear like the earth swallered 'em. Me and the boss smelled it out when we was checkin' up. That hill brush is too thick to stick a knife through in some places."

The rustler den interested Hatfield. He needed to know its exact location, for the presence of Rawhide Arbuckle's powerful bunch was a terrible menace to the range. Already Farris and Deets had told him many things. He knew what Farris wanted, the extent of the man's cruel ambitions which would ruthlessly crush Pirie and the Walshes. With Pirie and his friends defeated, Farris's claims to the lands he coveted would go through without opposition.

As his keen brain clicked, determining a way to draw out this piece of information, an owl hooted below. Everybody jumped, especially Chuckwalla.

"That there owl sounds like he was in an all-fired hurry," remarked Deets.

The owl spoke again. Hatfield became alert. Buck Robertson had been on watch in the saloon and this was a signal they had used before, a warning of danger.

Farris was suspicious, not of the visitor but of the false hooting. He thrust a hand into his shirt, gripping his pistol handle.

Someone sharply rapped on the door.

Tazewell Farris jumped up, jerking a six-shooter from the shoulder holster. It was a snub-nosed, large caliber revolver. He cocked it with his thumb and the falsely genial manner fell from him like a discarded cloak. He was fierce and elemental, a dangerous killer.

"Who's that! Hunh-hunh!"

His rising afforded Hatfield a good excuse to desert his seat. Unobtrusively the Ranger backed for the window. It was open and while the room was on the second floor it could not be much of a drop to the sandy lane below.

CHAPTER VIII

Exposed

SOUNDS from the saloon came through the thin partitions, murmuring voices and thudding of booted feet. And from outside a shrill voice with a frantic note to it began singing, to the tune of "Buffalo Gals:"

> Oh mister, mister, better come out tonight!
> Right now tonight. .

Buck was doing his best to give warning. A gruff reply from outside the door answered Farris' challenge.

"It's Lemmy and Bob, Mr. Farris. There's an hombre here claims Rawhide Arbuckle sent him and he's got a letter. Says he's a minin' engineer and wants to see Chuckwalla, just like that other one."

"What! Hunh-hunh!"

Farris shifted with astonishing celerity, dropping as he whirled with his gun rising on the tall interloper. His sharp brain had instantly jumped to the right conclusion. Either the first applicant was an impostor or the second one was and

Farris intended to find out which.

Hatfield's hand was a blur as he made a lightning draw. He managed to throw a hasty one at Farris just as the man ducked. The bullet whizzed a few inches above Farris, close to Deets, and slammed into the far wall.

With a squeak of terror Chuckwalla dived past and squeezed his fat body under the bunk, seeming to puff up in his abject fright. Farris was rolling, behind the table. He got off a quick shot and Hatfield's Stetson brim flipped, a chunk of felt flying from it as the slug cracked through the window glass.

The door crashed open and there stood Lemmy and Bob, a pair of armed huskies who were members of Farris' bodyguard. Behind them was a thin fellow with a sallow, bearded face. He wore corduroys and a brown hat with a narrow brim, and no doubt was the actual miner sent by Rawhide Arbuckle to protect and assist Chuckwalla Deets.

Not counting Deets, it was four to one, with Farris shielded by the table, his crimson face twisted in fury. Lemmy and Bob and the sallow man were digging for their Colts. All would be in action within a moment. Hatfield made his decision in a breath. He could crouch and try for Farris and with his deadly speed perhaps take along a second of his opponents, but the survivors would riddle him.

Again the Ranger Colt roared, deafening in the confined space of the room. A long splinter ripped from the table top as Hatfield's shot smashed the lamp which went out with a tinkling of breaking glass. Farris screeched in pain. He might have been hit but the Ranger thought redhot fragments of the chimney had propably sprayed him.

Hatfield pouched his Colt, at the window. He thrust his long legs out, dropped fast. He came up hard and short as his strong hands checked his descent and he hung there, swaying like a pendulum. Above him he heard lead singing through the opening. It would be outlined for his enemies by the light outside which came from lower windows and from a few road lamps burning in the street.

"Come on—drop!" That was Buck Robertson.

Hatfield released his hold. He let his knees go and relaxed his muscles as he landed in the soft dirt between *El Tigre* and a darkened store. It was a jolt, but he knew how to fall and as he rolled over and came up on a knee he was sure no bones were broken. A pistol had flipped from his holster and he groped for it.

Buck sent a shot upward and somebody who had run over to the window, hoping for another try at the fugitive before he could pull himself together, yipped in alarm.

A wild bullet flew from the opening and hit the side of the store several feet over them. Hatfield's hand closed on his gun. Hammer spur back under his thumb, he aimed upward and rapped two at the black rectangle marking the window. But the men in that room would not risk death by standing there, for Buck's lead had warned them back.

"I got the hosses around back, Jim.

Buck trotted ahead and the Ranger whirled, running for the lane behind *El Tigre*. Farris was shrieking frantic orders while startled citizens were yelling in the saloon, many starting out to see what was going on.

BREATH rasping hot in his powerful lungs, Hatfield hurried along close to his young aide. It had been a close call, with Farris. An ankle had turned under him as he had hit the ground. It wasn't much but he limped a bit and was glad to reach his golden sorrel. Old Heart 7 was close at hand, reins on the earth. Buck had left their mounts by a stable across the back street.

They were quickly in their saddles and retreating out of Marble Falls in a few bounds, headed for the crossing. Before them the Colorado gleamed and they could hear the dull booming of the rapids.

Half an hour later they were moving across the south range toward the Square 4. Hatfield had recovered his wind and they had made good the escape from the settlement. There had been no real pursuit in the night for Farris had only his bodyguard to count on and it had been easy to elude pursuers in the darkness.

"Yuh're a mighty big help, Buck," complimented the Ranger earnestly, at their first opportunity to waste breath in speech. "What happened downstairs?"

"Well," Buck told him, "I was hangin' around the saloon, waitin' for you when

Whiskers come along and talked with a barkeep. One of Farris' men heard him askin' for Chuckwalla, I s'pose. They chewed the fat, then signaled the others. I figgered what it must be, that Rawhide's real miner must have showed up. So I run out, brought our hosses close, and hoot-owled. Then I took a chance singin' to yuh. I was mighty hot under the collar when the shootin' began."

"Good work."

Buck was highly pleased with the praise. He admired Hatfield more than he did anyone else in the world and was trying to make himself into such a man as the Ranger.

They made tracks for the Square 4. The moon was up and the shadows black over the grassy, rolling range. It was midnight when one of Walsh's cowboys challenged them and they identified themselves. Passed through the armed cordon, they dropped off in the yard.

Worn out, they turned in at the bunkhouse and were asleep within a few minutes. . . .

After an early breakfast Hatfield consulted with the Walsh brothers, Pirie and Ab Bunton, giving them details of his experience, and telling what he had found out during his dangerous impersonation act in Marble Falls.

"Yuh got any idea where Rawhide's hideout might be?" he inquired. "All I could catch is it's in the hills on Square Four land and in thick timber. Westward of here."

"There's a thousand holes in those jungles," growled Pirie.

Ab Bunton spoke up. "I got a hunch it's over in a certain section we don't go into much, Ranger. Two years back, durin' round up, we tried huntin' wild cattle that had strayed in there, but yuh can't move a foot without hackin' a path. I can't swear to it, of course."

Bunton knew the country well for he had run cows all through it, as had the Walshes. And he had seen more of the rustlers than the others, had cut their trails and fought them.

"I need to smell it out," insisted Hatfield. "As long as Arbuckle's on deck yuh're liable to be hit any moment. If we could s'prise 'em in their camp we'd have the advantage."

It was vital to crush the strong rustler band being directed by Farris through Rawhide Arbuckle.

There were details on which any wise general checks up. Hatfield gave advice on dispositions in case of a fierce blow such as the one which had come close to destroying Pirie. The Square 4 now was the heart of resistance to Tazewell Farris, and the Ranger had no doubt there would be an attempt to crush them all there.

To his dismay he found the Walshes' supply of Colt, carbine and shotgun ammunition to be very low. Pirie's stock of such supplies, except for what they had been able to carry off with them, had gone up in smoke in his burning house.

"Why, yuh couldn't hold out more than a few hours if that ravenin' bunch really come at yuh, gents!" Hatfield exclaimed. "Where can we pick up more, and pronto?"

"Might get some at Burns' store in Marble Falls," suggested Jerry Walsh. "Though usually he has to order any big amount."

HATFIELD thought it over. "I hate to take a chance on sendin' any of yuh in there," he decided. "It's such a small town that Farris and his men are shore to spot yuh. And once he realizes we're short of ammunition he'll jump us on the dot."

"Then it's Lampasas," declared Claude Pirie. "There's no surety we could get what we need in Marble Falls, anyhow. But Corrigon's hardware store in Lampasas, next the Keystone Hotel, always carries a large stock of weapons and bullets."

"Good. Yuh ought to be able to make it there, while I hunt for Rawhide's hideout. S'pose Bunton picks a half-dozen waddies who can stand a hard run and heads for Lampasas? They can bypass Marble Falls and hook across country so Farris don't spy 'em, reach Lampasas and stock up. Better buy half a dozen double-barreled shotguns, and a couple long-range rifles. Check on yore food and if there's anything necessary they can fetch it along."

Ab Bunton nodded, glad to accept the mission.

On checking up they discovered that, with extra mouths to feed, the Square 4 needed more coffee, flour, sugar, and ba-

con. As much beef as was required could be slaughtered at the ranch.

"Take fast pack hosses," said Hatfield. "Cross the Colorado above the falls and hold the hills between yuh and the settlement. When yuh're safely by and out of sight yuh can ride on the highway. I'm goin' to send Buck to Marble Falls. He can keep an eye on Farris for us. They haven't spotted him yet."

Pirie and the Walshes agreed with Hatfield's views. Bunton went off to pick his men and saddle up for the run to Lampasas.

THE Ranger checked his weapons and talking to his golden sorrel as was his wont, he prepared to begin the search for Rawhide Arbuckle's stronghold.

The yard was a busy spot. Buck was getting Old Heart 7 ready for action while Ab Bunton and his boys had roped and slapped hulls on their chosen mounts. Blankets and pack saddles were being secured to the back of several animals that were more or less broken to this type of work.

Hatfield strolled over to obtain from Bunton the closest possible directions as to the rustler roost west of the Square 4. Bunton was topping off a savage, raw-boned black with a white foreleg. The mustang bucked furiously while the accomplished rider stuck to his seat.

The Ranger interestedly watched this display of splendid riding. Bunton grinned and winked at him.

"This hoss is a professional!" called Bunton, his words jolted from him.

The black crow hopped around the corral, doing his best to separate himself from the man and attempting to crush Bunton's chapped leg between the rails and his heaving ribs. For minutes the struggle went on with Bunton countering every trick the black thought up. At last the horse settled down to running in circles and answered the pull on the rein, sliding to a stop.

Bunton dismounted and the mustang allowed himself to be led out. He looked innocent enough as he stood with heaving flanks.

"Now he'll behave all day," asserted Bunton. "I wouldn't give two bits for a cayuse who don't fight for his rights in the mornin'."

CHAPTER IX

Tight Spot

BUNTON described to Hatfield the general route to follow and landmarks to watch for in searching the chaparral for Rawhide Arbuckle.

"Those rustlers can see yuh comin' while yuh can't spot the cusses till yuh're on top of 'em in thick brush," Ab warned earnestly.

"I'll have to chance that," the Ranger said. "You watch yore craw on the road to Lampasas. I savvy yuh're no cold-footer but don't take unnecessary risks. Remember these folks got to have that ammunition.

They shook hands warmly. The two stalwart young Texans had quickly become friends.

Hatfield briefed Buck and the youth set out for Marble Falls where he was to observe Tazewell Farris. He had not yet been seen by Farris' crew and his mission should not prove too perilous. Bunton's party moved off from the little collection of buildings, taking a line which would bring them to the Colorado well above the falls.

Then the Ranger took his leave of those he had come to help, after again cautioning Pirie and the four Walsh brothers against any relaxation of precautions against attack.

Goldy bucked a bit as the tall officer settled in his leather seat. Warmed up, Hatfield swung away from the Square 4, with a wave of a long hand. . . .

That afternoon Jim Hatfield lay flat on a high granite ledge, searching the country with his field-glasses. He had left the sorrel below and climbed to his eyrie on foot. A brilliant sun beat upon the wooded jungle. Granite peaks loomed about him, with virgin stands of cedar and pine stretching on and on. In the vast depressions tangled masses of brush, much of it thorned with cruel barbs, fought for light and air.

Narrow, twisting animal trails used by deer, wild cattle and raiding mountain lions offered about the only avenues through the matted chaparral, and these

were invisible from above for they had been roofed over by leafy branches. This was the western limit of the local cattle range.

It was within a square mile or so of this spot that Ab Bunton believed Rawhide Arbuckle might have his camp. But such a jungle would hide the rustler roost with more effectiveness than a haystack concealed a needle. Blind chance could hardly be depended upon and the Ranger was hoping for some kind of break to offer a further clue.

A quarter mile north he noted that a small brook issued from the swale and meandered in the general direction of Granite Creek.

"They'd need water, that's a cinch," he thought.

With this in his mind he studied what he thought was the hidden course of the rill through the chaparral. Birds and insects hovered over the growth. With his lenses in focus Hatfield slowly swept his field-glasses back and forth. Sooner or later, provided Arbuckle was in there, the enemy would emerge and he might spy them, but there was no guessing how long that might be. If they came out in the darkness he would miss them.

Black shapes in the sky, a flight of birds, swerved, splitting in two and then rejoining.

"Huh!" Hatfield murmured, for he knew they had been startled by something moving below them in the brush.

It could have been a wild animal—or a man. The spot was a mile or so in and on an approximate line the rill should take in following contours of the locality.

"I'll try it," he decided.

He put his glass back in the leather case and descended to where he had left Goldy. Under his shirt he had placed a revolver, and he had dropped spare shells in his pockets.

While looking over the region he had picked the course he should follow. He was able to come up, by a roundabout run, behind a patch of cedars. Reconnoitering from the woods he could see nothing to warn him that he was being watched from the chaparral.

The brush wall seemed impenetrable where the brook emerged into more or less open range. Yet when he tried it the branches let him through easily enough and he found himself in a low vaulted dome of growth. He saw several hoof-marks in the soft earth on the bank of the stream which gave forth a low, pleasing note as it moved along.

HE WOULD have to force a way for his horse if he left the rill. Dropping rein, he went on afoot, seeking an opening. A few yards farther on he was astonished to come upon a wide track running at a forty-five-degree angle from the brook's south bank. It had obviously been cut by men, for he could see where the sharply terminated ends of limbs had been slashed off. The tops of the trees had not been disturbed. In effect this was a blind tunnel through the jungle.

Trained at reading sign and trailing, Hatfield's eyes searched the ground. Horses carrying riders had come through this way, but not many of them and not too recently. He went back, picked up the reins and looped them to his saddle-horn.

"Come on, Goldy. Foller me, slow."

The sorrel obediently walked in his wake a few yards to the rear. He moved cautiously, pausing often to listen and study the blank walls. It was shaded in here although in occasional spots a streamer of sunlight stabbed through the roof. He could hear the rill's murmur and the shrill pipings of insects, the calls of birds. Once a low, dried-leaf rustling warned him and the man and the horse stood stockstill as a big Texas rattlesnake slowly crossed from one side of the trail to the other and made off. Hatfield gave the creature right-of-way without quibbling.

After a half-hour of careful progress he sighted the end of the tunnel. It ran into another and he approached the junction with the utmost caution, scouting each step. As he paused at the turn his practiced eye told him that this second blind trail was no more in use than the one he had come along. It was beaten by shod hoofs, back and forth, and ran in a northeasterly to southwest direction so far as he could estimate.

To the left, not far around the corner, he saw the bole of an ancient cedar. The trunk was a yard thick as it rose from the brown-strewn earth, and this great sentinel had fought its successful struggle for existence with the choking brush by shut-

ting off light, dropping, or allowing its lower limbs to die.

He signaled to Goldy, waving the sorrel off and Goldy obediently stopped as the Ranger made the swing and started southwest on the new trail.

"Reach!"

The sharp challenge nearly made him jump out of his halfboots. But a wrong move in such a situation could mean instant death. He could see no one and hardly knew from which direction the voice had come.

It took the greatest self-control to stand in the open after that challenge. Instinct urged him to dive into the chaparral, jerk a Colt and start fighting. But this course, while all very well when he could see his opponent, would have been foolhardy against an invisible foe.

"I'm nearer than I savvied," he decided.

He raised his hands shoulder high and his gray-green eyes flicking from side to side as he hunted for the man who had him covered. Ab Bunton's hunch had proved only too correct. He had run into a baited trap on the blind approaches to Rawhide Arbuckle's hideout, and on that he was ready to take his oath.

"Draw his fangs, Pedro."

The Ranger glanced up now, for the second time the sentry spoke had given Hatfield an approximate idea of his position. He was up in the ancient cedar. About twelve feet from the ground the staring black muzzles of a double-barreled shotgun pinned him, the weapon resting on a branch close to the trunk and steady on the Ranger below. Loaded with buck and spreading its pattern of death, the flying chunks of metal would wound him painfully even if it did not kill him.

He was too well acquainted with such outlaws not to realize his danger. If a careful search was made, it would bring to light the silver star on silver circle, the Texas Ranger emblem Hatfield carried in a secret pocket of his shirt. The fact that he was in there so close to the rustler roost would sign his warrant of execution.

Yet he had been right not to make a fight. He would have gone down without a chance of winning. Somebody stirred on the opposite edge of the trail and a man in dark velvet, with a knife stuck in his wide sash and a steeple sombrero on his black-haired head, pushed out. A large, pearl-handled six-shooter was aimed at the Ranger as Pedro, a slim Mexican, slowly slid forward.

THE Ranger knew he must seize the bit in his teeth before it was too late. Once they found his star and realized his identity, he was done for. He must try something, attempt to brazen it out, gain time, and watch for a slight chance to make a break.

His swift brain clicked with desperate but cool efficiency. He could not even see the man in the tree roost but he addressed him in a confident, strong voice touched by irritation.

"Where in tarnation blazes is headquarters?" he demanded angrily. "I been huntin' yuh for hours. Mr. Farris done sent me with an important message for Rawhide."

Pedro halted. His black eyes, set in a broad face whose high bones showed the Indian blood in his veins, fixed the tall stranger. After a brief pause the man in the tree said:

"Why didn't yuh come in the usual way then?"

"I missed it. I seen some cowboys and had to ride around 'em. Chuckwalla said I could make it if I follered the brook."

The names of Farris and Deets seemed to do it, but the shotgun still pinned him. Hatfield had managed to sow enough doubt, however, that his captor was willing to argue.

"What's the message?" asked the man in the tree.

"I ain't tellin' it to anybody but Rawhide. That's orders. Mr. Farris said so."

The outlaw in the cedar thought it over. "Pedro," he quickly ordered, "keep him covered till I come down. Shoot if he moves."

The shotgun shifted and the Ranger, with the cold sweat prickling his skin, watched the man in a gray flannel shirt, brown pants and worn boots descend, using dead branches as rungs. He dropped the last four feet, landing in the soft carpet, cradling the shotgun in his arms. He had on a flat-brimmed hat, and was stocky in build, with a cropped brown mustache and a pair of close-set, hard blue eyes. A Colt rode in his holster, but he kept the shotgun on the ready.

He stopped, facing the Ranger from the edge of the trail.

"March," he ordered. "I'll foller yuh in. If yuh make any smart play yuh'll find yoreself tryin' to digest lead."

"Tough, ain't yuh? All I want is to see yore boss. I got orders for him, I tell yuh."

"All right, all right. I never seen yuh before. Yuh work for Farris?"

"Shore. He sent for me. I'm his trouble-shooter. Been takin' care of the Austin end for him, but he needs me here. Let's get goin'. I've lost too much time as it is."

The squat bandit nodded. "Pedro," he said, "get up in the tree and watch the trail. Stop anybody yuh don't savvy."

Hatfield swaggered along the beaten trail. The rill was not far away and the blind tunnel wound this way and that. It had been widened by machetes so that horses could pass through. At the proper distance, so that the prisoner could not whirl and knock up the shotgun, came his escort.

CHAPTER X

Hideout

OFTEN the Ranger had been in tight spots. But none more so than this. Here the light was good enough, and the rustler shrewd. Hatfield could imagine how the buckshot would feel if the trigger were pulled. At this range the lead would rip holes as big as plates in his body. But he kept cool and as he walked before the outlaw, decided what he would say to Rawhide Arbuckle.

Suddenly the cut trail ended. It opened into a rocky niche in the hillside, where picketed mustangs stood, and there was a pool formed by water falling from the split slope. A bluff loomed over them and before him was a dark, triangular opening into the lower cliff, the peak above. It was the entrance to a cavern.

Several armed owlhoots lounged around and they stared as the squat man trailed Hatfield, who halted before them.

"Who's the ballet dancer, Shorty?" asked one with humorous talent. But they all were nevertheless alert.

"I caught him sneakin' through on our south trail," replied "Shorty," Hatfield's captor. "He says he has a message for Rawhide."

"Rawhides snoozin'. He won't thank yuh for wakin' him up. Yuh look like an eyeballer to me, big feller. What's yore game?"

The speaker was a blunt outlaw in brown leather, his round head covered by a black hat pulled down to his ears, and a dirty, bearded face. He seemed to be a lieutenant of Arbuckle's.

"No wonder you hombres are cheap, two-bit cow thieves," growled Hatfield in disgust. He spat angrily, scowling at the blunt man. "Yuh got only one idea in yore stupid heads, ain't yuh? Afeared of the law, afeared of the Rangers, on the dodge year in, year out. I savvy yore kind. Yuh shoot first and find out later yuh've killed a friend. Well, we operate different. We figger things out and that's why we win and can operate as we please without havin' to skulk in the bushes like yampin' brats!"

Bold as brass, the Ranger acted his part, aware that he had nothing to lose and everything to gain. They began cursing him, flushing with quick rage as he analyzed their souls for them. With the railing voice of a satisfied debater who is getting the best of the argument, Hatfield spoke on.

"Yuh're cold-footers, most of yuh. Yuh shoot fellers in the back, then sop up red-eye to forget yuh're yeller. Well, I'll show yuh how to fight. That's why I'm here. Farris wants action, and he wants it pronto."

The humor in Rawhide's lieutenant had deserted him as Hatfield gave him a fine tongue lashing.

"I got a mind to ventilate yuh," he snarled.

"But I'll lay ten to one yuh won't stand facin' me, both of us with hands down for a draw. Want to try?"

Rustlers had emerged from the cave and gaped at the scene as the utterly fearless stranger told off the bandits. The lieutenant was seething with fury and would have enjoyed watching his critic kicking in death agony, but he did not accept the challenge.

Shorty broke it up. "Come on, come on, let's go to it. Wake up Rawhide and see what he says. I ain't got all day."

With a curse the lieutenant swung on spurred heels and ducked inside the cavern. Soon he looked out.

"This way, tough hombre!" he called.

Hatfield grinned and swaggered forward. His brazen bluff had worked, up to this point, at least.

The light was none too good in the vaulted underground chamber. It took moments for his eye pupils to adjust. The dull metallic gleam of chalcocite, dark lead-gray with blue or green tarnish, shone in the uneven walls and ceiling. Here and there were pale-green streaks, no doubt malachite veins, with rich runs of reddish metal in spots.

All about were saddles, packs, boxes of ammunition, liquor and food, blankets and other articles belonging to the rustlers, many of whom were in the den.

Rawhide Ken Arbuckle lay on his back with a brown horse blanket under him, close to the right-hand-side of the cavern. A flask containing whisky stood near him. His head rested on a high-cantled, hand-carved saddle with hammered silver trappings.

HE WORE rawhide pants and a leather shirt laced with thongs of the same material. His large red ears stuck out at right angles to his long head, and a black mustache smudged his bronzed face. Rawhide's stringy black hair, thin at the peak, had recently received a load of bear grease to keep it smoothed down. Narrowed hazel eyes, still full of sleep, pinned the caller.

"Yuh're Arbuckle," said the Ranger, his voice boomng in the confined space. He stooped and seized Rawhide's square hand. "Farris told me all about yuh. I reckon yuh got more savvy than some of yore boys. They arrested me and wasted a lot of valuable time."

The lieutenant, still smarting from Hatfield's frank dissection of his character, crowded around, with others, watching and listening.

"Who in purple blazes are you?" growled Rawhide.

He came up into a sitting position, crossing his long legs under him. He rolled himself a quirly but did not pass the "makin's" to the stranger. Hatfield feigned not to notice the slight.

"Mebbe yuh've heard Farris speak of me," he said. "I'm his trouble-shooter. Been straightenin' things out at the Austin smelter for him, savvy? I got it all set up there and he wired me to hustle to Marble Falls."

From what he had learned by bearding Tazewell Farris in Marble Falls the Ranger knew so many details that he was convincing. His manner was entirely self-assured, as though Rawhide could not doubt what he said.

"Yore handle?" asked Arbuckle.

"Wild Man Hale, they call me. I ain't one to blow my own trumpet, but I'll tell yuh I got lots of successes behind me."

The lieutenant gasped at Hatfield's declaration of modesty. "He's got lots of gall, Rawhide. I'll say that for the sidewinder."

Rawhide shushed his aide with a gesture. He was interested, yet puzzled.

"How come Farris spoke of yuh?" he asked shrewdly.

Hatfield showed all his white teeth in a superior grin.

"*Amigo!*" he cried. "I can see yuh were fetched up in the monte, just an innercint country rascal. When yuh were a shaver yuh swiped two-bit pieces out of the prayer meetin' collection plates and hooked doughnuts from yore mother." With the patient air of an adult explaining the facts of life to a child, the Ranger continued: "No smart operator tells everything he savvies, does he? I'll lay a thousand to one yuh're holdin' out on us, —nothin' to worry about, mind yuh, but yuh take care of Number One first of all. Right?"

Rawhide blinked. Hatfield knew such men as the rustler leader, and his guess was about right. They usually held reservations as to how far they would go for an ally or employer, motivated as they were by what profit they could get out of a deal. Already Arbuckle had been maneuvered into a feeling of inferiority by the overbearing manner of the tall visitor. He did not like this, but it turned his mind from suspicion of Hatfield to asserting his own ego.

"What makes yuh think that?" he snapped.

"Oh, we ain't stewin'. We trust yuh as far as yuh do us. I've worked for Tazewell Farris eight years now and he pays off. He's a smooth, full-time operator and yuh

can't do better than stick with him. I got orders for yuh. Farris and me talked it over at the Tiger last night. We've decided to jump Pirie and the Walshes at the Square Four. It's got to be right off, because they're organizin' fast against us. Too bad yuh let Pirie slip through yore fingers the night yuh burned him out. He's the ringleader of these dumb cowhands. I'd have netted the cuss for shore if I'd been on the job."

"Oh yuh would, huh?" Rawhide exploded, jumping up and glowering. "If yuh're so all-fired clever, why don't yuh catch Pirie yoreself?"

"Don't fly off the handle," advised the Ranger. "Do yuh savvy what happened at *El Tigre* last evenin'? A spy sent by the ranchers fooled Chuckwalla and got to Farris, nearly downed him for fair! He had a note signed by you, claimin' he was a minin' engineer."

Rawhide Arbuckle's jaw dropped. "I did send a man over, like Farris asked me to, feller named Whiskers O'Toole."

"Yeah but before O'Toole got there, this cussed spy made it. It was touch and go. Luckily I'd just pulled in from Austin. I cooked his hash for him and saved the chief's life. Then we decided we'd jump the Square Four and pronto. Yuh'll take every man yuh got and hit there day after tomorrer at dawn. That's orders."

THE Ranger was well aware that Arbuckle would not carry out such a command without checking back to Tazewell Farris. And his objective was to talk himself into a position where he could get a chance to escape. He was surrounded by armed ruffians who would kill him at the slightest excuse.

Arbuckle drew in a final puff of cigarette smoke, threw down the stub and crushed it under a long, narrow, foot.

"I ain't got enough fighters for it," he said sulkily. "How about them reinforcements Farris promised to send me from Lampasas? We tried to smash the Square Four the night we smoked out Pirie. They got a regular Alamo there and they're on the prod, with sentries out and guns loaded. Chaw on that, General!"

"Don't get shaky," drawled the Ranger. "I'll be around this time, in command of the field. My helpers are marshalin' fifty real gunslingers in Lampasas. They'll pull in for the battle and we'll sweep right over the Square Four. It's pie, pie like mother used to make. For a joke, say the Pie is a pie!" He roared with mirth.

"Huh!" Rawhide was hardly pleased. "Farris promised me I'd run things as far as the strongarm work goes. I ain't puttin' my boys under anybody else, savvy?"

"We'll work it out. I'll tell yuh what's to be done, and you can relay the orders. We aim to clean out them wasps so we can begin work on the stamp mill. After all, that's our aim. This is all extra expense and fuss.

Arbuckle grunted. His men were speechless as they heard their chief placed in a subordinate position by the loud-talking, brash "Wild Man Hale."

Hatfield's eyes now had become accustomed to the gloomy light in the vaulted room. He could see small details, like the two shafts winding off into the depths westward of the structure. It was an ancient workings, caverns formed by Nature's mighty operations, and scooped out by hand as men had discovered the metal and torn it from the earth.

"This is a Spanish mine?" he asked.

"Nope," answered Arbuckle. The Lipans worked it for themselves and kept it hid from the *padres* while they were around."

"I savvy."

Lipan Indians had roamed and dwelt in this central mountain section for centuries. This was one of their secret mines, which had furnished them with material for arms, decorations and the manufacture of artifacts. The savages had worked the veins of pure metal, since they had understood little about refining.

Texas Rangers had helped the settlers drive out Lipans and other tribes, because the red raiders had made life miserable for the pioneers. Now Tazewell Farris had rediscovered the great lode, extending across the Pie and Square 4 ranges.

Hatfield's intimate knowledge of all that was going on between Farris and the rustlers, his self-confident speech and manner, had changed his status from that of a suspected spy to that of a powerful if annoyingly brash ally. Rawhide Arbuckle scratched his greased head. Then he stooped, picked up the flask and held it out.

"Here, Wild Man, have a snifter. We

better talk this over. I'd like to see Farris, too. Yuh say yu'll toss in fifty gunhands? That ought to make it."

"Don't worry about anything, pard. When Wild Man Hale's on deck, things run like they was oiled."

Somebody outside shouted. They moved from the cavern, facing toward the in-trail. Hatfield stayed back beside Rawhide Arbuckle.

Into sight hove two riders, one a member of the rustler band the Ranger had not before seen, the second the rotund, bearded Chuckwalla Deets!

CHAPTER XI

Trapped

RANGER Hatfield knew instantly that the jig was up. Chuckwalla Deets saw him and one peek was enough. Deets uttered a shrilling bleat of fright, kicked his toes loose from the tapped stirrups, and threw himself off his lathered mustang, diving for the rock outcrop nearest him.

"What's bitin' him!" gasped the astonished Arbuckle. "He acts like a hornet stung him!"

Hatfield knew only too well what had inspired Chuckwalla's behavior. Swarms of armed outlaws were before him, in an open space near the mine. He had no way of reaching Goldy or any mount, for that matter, without giving them seconds in which to fill him with lead.

The escort who had brought Chuckwalla in pulled his horse around, his jaw sagging in amazement at Chuckwalla's antics. Deets had flattened himself in the boulders, trying to make himself inconspicuous as he howled warnings to Rawhide and the band.

"That's him! Look out! Grab him! Shoot the cuss!"

For a breath Hatfield considered ramming a Colt into Arbuckle's back ribs and forcing the bandit chief to give him safe conduct through the outlaw ranks. But there were too many of them close, some excellent marksmen who could pick him off without hitting Rawhide. They could get him from the sides or from the rear, even if he managed to down Arbuckle before he died.

Rawhide jumped forward, running toward Chuckwalla.

"What's wrong?" he shouted.

"That big feller!" screamed Deets. "He's workin' for Pirie! He's a spy! Kill him!"

Only one course remained. The Ranger whirled, pulling a Colt as he scrambled back into the empty cavern.

"I told yuh so!" howled the rustler lieutenant.

They all swung to tear the tall interloper into shreds, but Hatfield was already running through the underground chamber. Sure of him at last, Rawhide and his killers raised their weapons and began blasting at the fleeing officer.

He heard slugs whirling into the cave, slapping into the chalcocite walls, kicking up the dust of ages which had settled on the floor. He held his fire, aware he would need every cartridge he had later. All he could do for the moment was to find a spot of cover where he could hole up and save his life. What came after that he had no way of estimating.

He chose the right-hand shaft because it was a few jumps nearer the entrance. Head down he dashed into it. Rustlers were shoving into the mine on his trail, blood in their eyes. The Ranger's Stetson crown hit the top and was brushed back from his head, hanging by its strap. The shaft quickly narrowed. It was pitch-black ahead, and a groping hand could touch the splintered ore walls at both sides.

He stopped short at the turn and crouched, shielded by a bulge of rock. Raising his revolver he could see the dark figures of his foes against the cavern mouth and he pulled back the hammer spur under his thumb joint, took aim and let loose.

An outlaw carrying a shotgun dropped the weapon as he was hurled around by a heavy slug from the Ranger's gun. He howled in shocked pain, fell to one knee, his cries echoing in the cave. The others broke to the rims, sending a volley at the flash of Hatfield's pistol. He drew back, as the bullets clicked close past him, striking the wall and the dirt.

"Come out of there, cuss yuh!" roared Rawhide Arbuckle.

In a brief lull, Hatfield heard Chuckwalla's excited urgings.

"That big hombre walked in on us in Marble Falls! He lied, said he come from Rawhide, had a forged note and all. Catch him, take him! He's as dangerous as chain lightnin', and just as fast."

Hatfield fired again. Rustlers hastily hunted positions at angles where he could not make hits.

"Hold it!" ordered Rawhide. He repeated his command in an irritated bellow as several of his men kept firing at Hatfield. "Aim at the far curve of the wall," went on Arbuckle. "They'll ricochet into the cuss. All together, now!"

Hatfield hastily threw himself back and down low. He was just in time as a blast from enemy guns roared with deafening sound. Bullets ploughed the curving side and many were deflected, slashing into the opposite wall where he had taken up his first position. Fragments of searing lead, bits of rock and ore rained upon him as he crawled off.

HE BUMPED hard into a sharp outcrop. He could see nothing in the winding tunnel, had to keep a hand out before him and feel his way along. His head kept striking the top so he was forced to stoop. Behind him he heard Rawhide Arbuckle and his men cautiously trailing him.

His breath rasped in and out of his heaving lungs. It was close in the dusty old shaft. It was probably a blind alley he had chosen, but he meant to hold off the enemy as long as possible, fight to the bitter end.

He paused and listened. The voices of the rustlers sounded strange, muffled. He did not hear them now, but after a short wait a stabbing beam of light hunted into the shaft. It came from a bull's-eye lantern they had brought for the manhunt.

By this he was able to see the sulphides, dark lead-gray tarnished blue or green, and more reddish veins of the metal. There was no shoring in the ancient mine, the hardened ore holding its shape. Beyond was only the blackness of the curving tunnel, constricted and uninviting.

Arbuckle's guns flamed and boomed. Hatfield's ears rang with the piercing explosions, carried in the funnel. He found another niche in which he crouched, again shooting to slow them down.

The bull's-eye beam halted and fixed upon the jutting shield behind which he was sheltered. They tried the ricochet trick again but this time it did not work for the curve of the other wall was not right for it. The slugs flew well past him and none of the outlaws dared rush him because that would mean death to the first few who tried it.

Arbuckle shut off the light.

"Hey, you!" he yelled. "Why don't yuh come out? We ain't goin' to hurt yuh. What's yore game, anyways? Yuh work for Pirie, I s'pose?"

"I work for myself," answered the Ranger. "Right now, anyway. I'll drill the first half dozen of yuh who come at me."

Rawhide cursed him fervently. "Yuh shore got plenty nerve, hombre, whatever yore handle is. How would yuh like to ride for me?"

"Dance, don't yuh mean? I guess I'll stay here. It's more comfortable."

[*Turn page*]

He was fully aware he could not trust the outlaws to do anything less than kill him, perhaps after a little sport. They would take his guns, search him, beat him up, finish him off.

He stayed where he was, hearing the murmuring of their voices as they conferred. While there was life there was hope, however scant it might be. Ab Bunton would return from Lampasas, would finally deduce what must have happened to the Ranger. Rescuers might possibly make it in time. He closed his mind firmly to the objections that Pirie and the cowmen had only enough fighters to hold off the enemy, that Farris was marshaling another savage crew in Lampasas for the finish.

"Hey, big feller!" Rawhide Arbuckle yelled to him again. "Are yuh listenin'?"

"I might be.'

"Yuh've asked for it. If yuh won't step out, why yuh can stay in there." Sardonic amusement was in Rawhide's voice. "Yuh'll never see daylight again, hombre."

Hatfield could only await results. They had reached some decision about him. He heard them moving around but they were out of his sight, shielded by the turn in the tunnel wall. Light beams shifted here and there, he heard the scuff of booted feet, low voices, rocks cracking together, the soft sound of earth being dumped.

At first he was unable to tell what they were working at but soon he guessed it. They were walling up the constricted side shaft, entombing him! Rawhide's sharp order penetrated to him.

"Fetch in a load of that adobe, boys. We'll stick it in the cracks so's no air can get through to the sidewinder."

Hatfield listened while they built the block in the narrow drift. Dust raised by the disturbance caught at his throat and nose. He coughed and sneezed. The inky air seemed so stale he wondered how long he would be able to inhale it.

The hard fight had sapped him. He was scratched and bleeding where bits of lead and rock had stung his flesh. With a tight wall to the outer cavern cutting him off he would soon exhaust what oxygen there was and die a horrible death by suffocation.

THE moments dragged on. It took all his fortitude to hold himself in hand. The human mind reeled before that trapped-animal sensation. There seemed to be no way out. Hatfield could not shut off thoughts of Anita and Buck Robertson, of Captain McDowell and his other good friends.

And without his aid, Claude Pirie and the Walshes might quickly be crushed by Farris' evil attack. Ab Bunton would surely be in the thick of the battle, and if he died it would break Lara's heart. The other children and the women, the ranchers and their aides, would all suffer, and some would be killed when Farris struck.

He pulled himself together. He could do nothing more at the moment. By an effort of his strong will he relaxed himself and rested. He dared not drift off to sleep but as the noises made by the enemy dimmed away behind the closed barrier he catnapped, always on a hair-trigger.

CHAPTER XII

The Road to Lampasas

AS AB BUNTON and his picked cowboys splashed their horses across Sulphur Creek and headed for the road into Lampasas, the sun was a fiery, enlarged ball to their left. They had held to a line miles west of Marble Falls, but now they were three hours run from the settlement on the Colorado where Tazewell Farris had his headquarters.

Bunton scouted the way through elm and pecan groves which broke the cattle range. He and his men knew the country well, since Lampasas was an inviting spot to cowboys off the trails and ranches. They would visit the town to blow off steam.

Pioneer cattlemen had battled the Comanches, Lipans and other tribes over the wild stretches, while the Horrell-Higgins feud was still smoldering in the vicinity. Texas Rangers had come to Lampasas more than once on official business.

Riding behind Bunton came "Red" Thomas, lean and good-natured, his brick-colored hair showing under his jaunty Stetson. Next was the youngest of the outfit, Bill Kettle, who was only seven-

teen, but was a man just the same. These two were Pie riders. Abe Muller and Frankie Neale of the Square 4, and Moose Grogan of Pirie's spread filled out the crew. Each cowboy led a pack horse for which he was responsible.

It was a relief to travel on the beaten dirt highway leading to the lively town after the cross-country jaunt. Bunton had timed his arrival in order to approach after dark, as a precaution in case enemies were present. It was known that Rawhide Arbuckle had compatriots in Lampasas, that the rustler visited his old stamping grounds on occasion. And Bunton had strict orders not to take any unnecessary chances.

Ab Bunton enjoyed action, and he liked success even more. His greatest ambition however, was to win the heart and hand of Lara Pirie, a mighty big ambition, he thought for a cowboy who had run off from home at the age of fourteen to join a trail outfit headed for Kansas. Returning to Texas he had ridden for one spread after another, shifting from place to place with a young fellow's restlessness.

It was not until he had met Lara that any idea of settling down had seriously occurred to him. He had done well in the fight against Tazewell Farris and the rustlers, and had reason to believe that Claude Pirie would pick him as a foreman once the foe was defeated. Then he would have a chance with Lara.

Sandy hills at the side of the road petered off into rolling, somewhat barren country below Lampasas. As the cowboys steadily shoved north, the sun dropped behind the western mountains and a strange purple light enfolded their world. And after another mile they sighted the lamplight in Lampasas.

Reaching the outskirts, Bunton drew off the road into an elm grove and halted the procession.

"Take a breather, boys. Wait here in the woods while I go have a look-see before we run in."

The boys were glad to relax and roll smokes while Bunton went to check up.

He pulled up near a row of stone buildings, looking through a broad way to the public square where most of the important saloons, stores and other structures were grouped. Lampasas boasted an exceptionally large plaza and wide streets. A two-story stone courthouse dominated the commons.

Bunton could see the front of the famous Keystone Hotel, which had served stageline passengers for years. It was of limestone, and its windows blazed with light, for its bar was a popular gathering place. Saddle horses lined the rails around the sidewalks of the square but this was nothing unusual, for cowboys often rode in for an evening's sport. In the center of town oil-burning lanterns served as street lights.

Stores had been shut up for the night. Right next door to the Keystone was Corrigon's hardware store. A narrow, dark passage separated the two stone buildings and they backed on a service road. Corrigon's was closed and dark, as were the establishments of the other merchants.

Strains of accordion and fiddle music, the raucous cries of rollicking young men, came to Bunton. Lampasas was warming up for the evening's fun.

AB BUNTON pulled his rein, turning the raw-boned black mustang with the white foreleg. The horse had behaved all day and had stood the pace remarkably well, as Bunton had expected he would. He was a savage bucker in the mornings, but when guided by such skillful hands made a fine mount.

He dropped rein at the kitchen door of a small house north of the center and rapped with his quirt. A stout, middle-aged woman opened the door.

"I'm Ab Bunton of Pirie's Pie, ma'am. Is Mr. Corrigon here?"

"Yes. Come in, young man. He's eating his dinner."

Bunton swept off his hat and stooped as he entered the low doorway. At a table in the corner sat John Corrigon, the hardware merchant.

"Why, howdy, Ab!" greeted Corrigon. "Pull up a chair and Ma will fix yuh a plate."

"*Gracias.* I'll have to eat fast, though, suh."

Bunton was hungry and could not refuse a meal. Mrs. Corrigon smilingly prepared a heaping plate of roast beef with mashed potatoes, and there was plenty of home made bread and molasses on the table. A large white cup held steaming coffee, and Bunton fell to, as he told Cor-

rigon what he had come for.

Corrigon finished, and wiped his mouth with the back of his sleeve.

"We'll go over and yuh can pick out what yuh need, Ab, soon as yuh're through," he agreed.

Bunton topped off the third cup of coffee and jumped up.

"I'm ready now. Let's go."

Corrigon walked across the square while Bunton rode to pick up his men. They came in behind the hardware store, with the bulk of the Keystone Hotel near at hand. Shafts of light came from the windows in the limestone walls. Corrigon had arrived and had lighted a lantern in the rear storerooms.

Corrigon held the list which Bunton had brought, studying it by the lantern. Boxes of ammunition, weapons and other such stuff were sorted from the stock and piled in the middle of the room. It took half an hour to get it all out and ready to load.

Bunton propped open the back door so they could more easily pass through with their burdens. His men were near and at his low hail they led the pack horses to the entry. The saddles had pegs set in them so that bindings could be looped and knotted to secure the loads.

They needed more light by which to arrange the boxes and bags filled with shells and guns. Corrigon brought out the lantern after finishing up in the storeroom. Bunton was eager to complete this stage of the proceedings, for the ammunition was the most vital requirement at the Square 4, and he intended getting four of the pack horses started home with it before attempting to pick up food at the grocery store.

Pirie and all those at the Walsh brothers' place were depending on this. So far everything had gone swimmingly. There had not been the slightest threat.

Music and a babble of voices issued from the Keystone. The minutes flew by as the cowboys made sure of the packs. Lariats and lengths of rawhide lashings were used. It took trained skill to pack a saddle so the load would not slip to one side and fall off or drag. Bunton and his friends worked as fast as possible.

"Each one is responsible for his own pack hoss," said Bunton. "Get back to the home ranch, no matter what, savvy? Red, go on, yuh're loaded. Wait at that grove where we stopped on the way in. If we don't join yuh inside half an hour, run for the Square Four fast as yuh can."

Red Thomas moved away. A short while later Bill Kettle led off another precious load.

Two men in black suits and hats stepped from the back door of the Keystone. They glanced over at the busy scene behind the hardware shop. After a moment one turned and went back inside. Bunton could not distinguish their shadowed features but the fellow who had gone in again seemed familiar. An uneasy feeling came over Bunton.

"Hustle, boys," he begged.

Soon Abe Muller rode off with his loaded animal trailing him. Frankie Neale was the fourth, and the first four eo leave carried a large part of the ammunition and weapons. Ab Bunton and Moose Grogan would take what was left, run to the general store and pick up a few needed provisions.

BUNTON again glanced at the dark blob of the man slouched against the Keystone wall. Ab Bunton's sense of urgency, of wanting to get away from there, was almost unbearable. Corrigon stood on his stoop. He had given them a hand.

"Come on!" called Moose Grogan. He stood by his saddled mustang as he hooked the lead-rope of the pack horse in place.

Suddenly armed men rushed from the far side of the store while others issued from the hotel. "There he is!" a voice boomed. "That's Bunton!"

Ab Bunton loomed in the lantern's glow. A man passing by a shaft from a lighted saloon window was calling harsh orders. The startled Bunton recognized the crimson-faced Farris. Strongarm agents commanded by Farris bobbed up everywhere. Bunton whirled, drawing a Colt to make his fight. The unarmed Corrigon jumped back inside his store.

Moose Grogan had just thrown a leg over his saddle. He turned in the leather seat, reaching for his revolver, but the bunched leather at his chap-covered hip had pushed the holster aside and it took him a couple of moments to get it clear. Grogan made a silhouette target as he sat his horse.

Enemy guns flamed. Grogan sagged and fell to the ground as his mustang violently bucked at the crashing explosions. The drag of the pack horse held Grogan's mount back, so he did not run far.

Bunton had started shooting, aware that these were Farris men. The bug hunter was still giving excited orders. For seconds Bunton's pack animal formed a shield as the cowboy drove lead at approaching gunhands. Heavy slugs thudded into the barrel ribs and the mustang shuddered, moved a few steps and slowly sank to the ground.

"This way, Bunton!" howled the excited Corrigon. "Come inside!"

The cowboy might have reached that open doorway but he still hoped to get away. Besides Farris had plenty of men and could surround the store and catch him.

Bunton put down his head and ran for it. Close ones ripped past him. His black mustang was only a few bounds away. Moose Grogan lay stiffening in the yard, riddled with lead. Bunton vaulted into his saddle and bent forward to snatch up his reins. His spurs scratched the black which started with a terrific leap.

A couple more jumps would take him around the side of the Keystone's livery stable, a bulky structure of limestone blocks. The wall would shield him for badly needed breaths. He swung to send shots in order to rattle his foes.

Something burned the calf of his left leg, slicing the leather of the boot top. He realized that a bullet must have hit, but it was only a scratch. Triumph welled in his pounding heart as the black made the stable corner. Moose Grogan's body, his two horses and Bunton's dead pack animal remained behind in Corrigon's yard, but that could not be helped.

Bunton had had some narrow escapes in his young life. Rawhide Arbuckle and his rustlers had shot a horse from under him and nearly caught him, and there had been other occasions in his dangerous profession when the black shadow of death had seemed about to envelop him.

But this moment, as he felt his saddle give away, was the worst he had ever known. One instant he was safe and on his way, sure he was clear. The next he knew he was lost, for the leather hull whipped off, Bunton along with it.

He twisted his lithe body and managed to land on his shoulder, letting himself roll as a trained bronc buster should. It jolted him, knocked the wind out of him. The black mustang with the white foreleg dashed on into the night, on around the stable.

"Grab him! There he is!"

The stab of a bull's-eye framed Ab Bunton. His right arm had doubled under him and the shock had knocked his pistol from his hand. It lay several feet away and he knew they would kill him instantly if he reached for it.

Ruffians came up, covering him with pistols. Tazewell Farris was urging them along. They took Bunton's spare revolver and hunting knife, and shoved him back to Corrigon's store. A couple of hard-eyed fellows were holding the hardware merchant in his store, guns on him.

CHAPTER XIII

The Hole

CURIOUS citizens had come to see what was going on.

"Break it up, boys," ordered Farris. "We were after a passel of horse thieves."

There were at least twenty armed outlaws with Farris. They formed a circle, keeping the bystanders off, and soon the gathering dispersed as men returned to the saloon. Bunton, who had been shoved into the store, was taken to the storeroom and lined up by light of a lantern with Corrigon.

"Yuh got yore nerve with yuh, mister," growled Corrigon. "Yuh killed one of those boys. What's the idea?"

"They're outlaws," replied Farris coldly. "We have no quarrel with you, sir. What were they loading behind your store?"

Corrigon shrugged and remained silent. Bunton set his lips. But one of Farris' men began to search him and in his shirt pocket found the folded list. He handed it to Farris who quickly scanned it.

"Chiefly ammunition and weapons," "Hunh-hunh!" Farris frowned as his pale-brown eyes focused on Ab Bunton. The narrow nose twitched, his cheeks became

more crimson. Stuffy dignity was in his bearing. He sniffed violently. "I understand! Pirie and your friends are short of these vital supplies. A pleasant thought. Hunh-hunh!"

A man whom Bunton had seen with Farris before, spoke up. He had a waxed mustache and was wearing dark clothes.

"There were more of 'em, Mr. Farris. Lucky I stepped out for a breath of air when I did."

Bunton saw what had occurred, though he was not sure why Farris was in Lampasas. The man he had seen come out of the Keystone when they had been loading behind Corrigon's, and whom he had thought looked familiar had been one of Farris' bodyguards he had seen at the Pie. The fellow had hurried to report, and Farris had struck fast.

"How many were with you, Bunton?" demanded Farris.

Bunton shrugged. He would not answer. Suddenly Farris hit him across the mouth with the back of his hand. Bunton surged at him, but was seized and pinioned.

"Tie him up and put a gag on him," ordered Farris coldly. He scowled at Corrigon, who was bitterly angry at their treatment of Bunton and his men.

"Yuh'll answer for this," snapped the storekeeper. "Bunton and Pirie are good hombres, friends of mine."

"They are outlaws. Hunh-hunh! As I said, I have no quarrel with you, sir. I'd advise you not to interfere. Silence is your best policy, do you understand?"

Corrigon shrugged. He was surrounded by hostile guns.

"Hunh-hunh!" said Farris. "Ulman, you live in this town, don't you? Well, escort this storekeeper to his home. If he stays there let him alone. But if he tries to come out, shoot him."

A wide-set town man grinned at Corrigon. "Come on, yuh old skinflint. Behave, now." The armed rough pushed the merchant away.

Farris swung on Bunton whose hands had been fastened behind him and his own bandana shoved into place to silence him.

"This man is dangerous," he said in the same cold voice. "Shoot him if he tries to escape. Hunh-hunh! We must run him out of town quickly. Blackie, take a dozen mounted fighters and block the highway south. Maybe you can sweep up more of these cowboys. Olney, marshal the rest of the Lampasas group. It's obvious Pirie is low on ammunition or he wouldn't have sent Bunton's party on such a frantic mission. The sooner we strike, the better for us. We hardly need the reinforcements I promised Arbuckle. Should be easier than we expected."

Ab Bunton summoned his fortitude for he needed it, as he was roughly shoved outside, loaded on a horse and secured. Farris had jumped to the right conclusion —that the Square 4 could not long endure a full attack.

Blackie had hurried ahead to cut off Bunton's running friends. Another aide was calling out the outlaw crew hired by Farris to supplement Rawhide Arbuckle's big rustler band. Aware of Pirie's weak point, Farris would hit hard and just as quickly as he could maneuver his forces into position. Without ammunition the cowmen were doomed.

Farris came outside and checked Bunton's bonds himself.

"Hunh-hunh! Don't let him get away. I'd much rather have you show me his dead body."

An armed killer grinned. "Don't worry, Mr. Farris. He's as good as buzzard bait right now."

Ab Bunton decided they would probably run him out of Lampasas, shoot him, and dump his body in the woods.

* * * * *

RANGER Jim Hatfield jumped awake again. This time it was a nightmare of being slowly smothered and unable to move a muscle which had disturbed the series of uneasy naps he had taken as he waited near the barrier cutting him off from the world of the living.

He drew in a deep breath. Hours had passed since they had sealed him in the shaft tomb. It was staler in the constricted tunnel yet he was still able to replenish the oxygen in his lungs. He rolled a quirly, by touch alone since it was pitch black. He struck a match. The little flame showed the gray chalcocite and the red streaks of veins in the walls and ceiling. A fire also required oxygen for life.

"Now I wonder!" he muttered.

The rest had strengthened him and he went around to the barrier to check on it. On his side it was extremely rough but his groping hands could feel not the slightest draft where the rustlers might have failed to seal gaps.

"Huh!" he thought. "Air's gettin' in somehow, just the same!"

It was not coming by way of the cave mouth, so it must be seeping through from the rear. He began groping along the shaft and after a few paces decided it had a slight upward pitch.

Soon it became necessary for him to proceed on his hands and knees. There was just about room for his body as he pushed on, bruising his flesh wherever he contacted sharp shale and chunks of fallen ore.

It had been afternoon before he had noted the rill and then he had consumed time in finding the end of the blind trail, in which he had been captured. Talking with Rawhide Arbuckle had occupied him for more time, so by now it must be night or close to it.

He lay flat to catch his wind and lighted another match. Around him were the chalcocite walls with some greenish discoloration due to oxidation and to the presence of malachite. Ahead the black hole turned a sharp angle. He wormed to this and was sure that he could feel a coolish, though faint, breeze.

Hatfield was excited as the prospect of escape heightened. He could see no light but it was probably dark outdoors. He squeezed past the turn and after a few yards he came to the blank end of the trail.

He could go no farther. But rolling over, he could make out a gap in the ceiling and beyond he saw a bright star twinkling in the sky!

He listened, aware that the opening might be within earshot of the front cave and the rustler crew. But he did not hear them. There was a faint soughing of wind, the brush of dried leaves disturbed by it, and a faroff trickling of water.

"They can't savvy this hole is here or they would have closed it and set a guard on it," he thought.

He cupped another match in his hand and could make out the dimensions of the blowhole. It had no doubt been made by the savages who had originally worked the mine, as a ventilator for the shaft. Such devices were common.

The exit, however, was too small to let him through. He took his long hunting knife from its sheath and began carefully picking away at the soft side. Gravel and dirt fell on him and he had to turn his face aside and shut his eyes to keep from being blinded. There was a chance he would cause a cave-in which would bury him alive, but he had to take it.

It was with the deepest relief that at last he squeezed head and shoulders through the enlarged crack and drew in the fresh night air. He stood in the waist-deep hole, with huge granite boulders surrounding him, screened by thick chaparral and stands of cedars. Westward the wild mountains loomed black against the night sky. East lay the cattle range, and Rawhide Arbuckle's camp could not be far away—only a couple of hundred yards at most.

A spring was gurgling tantalizing music nearby. He was weak from thirst. His mouth was as dry as flannel and filled with grit. Slowly he climbed through a niche among the rocks. Higher up he saw a reddish glow rising over a drop. That must be the outlaws' campfire in front of the cave. It helped orient him. He edged down to the spring, drank, and cleaned up a bit.

GOLDY must be in the vicinity for the sorrel was trained to wait around for his friend, no matter how long the Ranger might be gone. The gelding would not permit anyone else to catch him and unless the rustlers had shot him, would be running free.

Hatfield followed the little rill from the spring. It was one of the sources of the brook which had led him to the first blind trail to Arbuckle's hideout. It was slow going, for he only inched along, to keep quiet.

He came close to the clearing in front of the camp. The fire was burning there and he sighted a number of his armed enemies, lounging around, smoking and drinking. They must already have eaten their evening meal.

Keeping low, trying not to disturb a twig, the Ranger worked his way eastward. It was over an hour before he had

passed the fire before he rose up in the main trail, out of sight of the cave entry.

He had to have his horse. Goldy was trained to come at a whistled signal. His enemies would hear this, but he must give it to call his mount. He whistled shrilly and waited, gun in hand.

After a time he heard the thud of hoofs. And he also caught the voices of outlaws, alarmed at the whistling. They would surely come to investigate and there also were sentries along the trails.

It seemed an eternity before the powerful sorrel trotted to him and nuzzled his outstretched hand.

"Here we go, Goldy! We got to run for it!"

It was a real comfort to settle in his leather. He could catch the hoofbeats of rustler horses coming from the hideout even as he mounted.

He rode hard, picking up speed, though he had to keep low over the running sorrel's mane to avoid being brushed off by overhanging limbs. He chose the south trail branch, the way he had come in, keeping an eye peeled for that huge cedar in which the sentinels roosted.

After a brisk dash he sighted the tree against the patch of sky. Raising his Colt he began firing, aiming from ten to fifteen feet above the ground. From this side the guard on his perch was exposed. As he flashed up he heard a shrill yelp from above.

He switched his lead to the opposite wall of the brush, slapping slugs into it as he drove on. A carbine crackled and a bullet zipped overhead. Then he had roared by.

He hurried on and, familiar with the route now, and knowing Rawhide Arbuckle and his men would be coming after him to see what was going on, he reached the rolling, open range in record time.

"Never have a closer one than that, Goldy," he murmured to his equine comrade. He could still sense that trapped sensation which had seized him when he had been sealed in the black mine shaft.

He set his course for the Square 4.

JIM HATFIELD IN
THE WASTELAND EMPIRE
By JACKSON COLE
NEXT ISSUE

CHAPTER XIV

Buck Reports

GRIMLY a Square 4 cowboy, riding circles around the four houses and helping guard the rancher stronghold, challenged Hatfield, but soon the Ranger dropped rein in the yard. First he saw to his horse and, after rubbing Goldy down, turned the sorrel into the big grazing corral.

Worn to a frazzle he felt he must sleep before he could proceed in the battle against Farris. The sentries who had passed him through had told him that Bunton and his men had not yet returned from Lampasas with the ammunition and guns, but the alert guards around the ranch had orders to watch for Bunton's party.

When Hatfield roused, the first touch of the new day was staining the eastern sky. Men were stirring at the Square 4. Claude Pirie and Jerry Walsh were in the yard, at work.

The Ranger went to the watering trough, for the crawling he had done in the old mine had badly stained his clothing and skin. He shaved, washed, brushed his trousers, and scraped the mud off his boots. His shirt was a wreck but he had a spare one in his pack and donned it. He was as hungry as a wolf and the odor of coffee and frying foods was wafted to him from the kitchens.

He called Pirie and the Walshes and they went into Jerry's house and sat down. Lara served them and as they ate breakfast, Hatfield told them quickly how he had found the rustler hideout.

Pirie whistled. "So that's where they holed up!"

"Somebody told me there was an old Injun mine in there somewheres," Lew Walsh said, nodding.

"That's right, gents," said the Ranger. "They used to dig out copper for weapons and spears and kettles. There's chalcocite —copper sulphite and nearly eighty per cent metal. It forms the chief lode which extends all the way across the Pie in a wide swathe and on through Square Four range to the mine. Mixed with it are other

ores, malachite for one, which is copper carbonate and hydroxide, but the chalcocite's the richest by a long shot. Farris has made test bores all through here. We melted down the chunks of ore he dug out and got a copper bead. I tried it myself."

"Is it hard to mine?" asked Pirie.

"Not if it's done right, and in a big way. To cinch it, as I told yuh, Farris has found a perfect stamp mill site on the Pie. Yuh don't often have everything just right for such a plant, with good water, plenty of room and elevation. And soon a railroad spur will be available."

"What's the stamp mill fore?" inquired Ike Walsh with deep curiosity.

"It crushes the stuff fine enough to separate the ore from the waste. Small cars run by gravity fill the bins. Then it passes over feed pans to the steam stamp. When yuh got it concentrated yuh ship in barrels to the smelter. Farris' smelter is close to Austin. The smelter removes impurities such as iron, sulphur, nickel, arsenic and so on. Yuh end up with refined, pure copper in the shape of bars, cakes or ingots, dependin' on what yuh aim to use it for.

"They make wire from bars, plates from the cakes, and alloy from ingots. If yuh mix some zinc with copper yuh get what they call soft brass. Alloy tin with copper, and yuh have hard brass or bronze. They manufacture kettles, buttons, cartridge and shell cases, ordnance, sheathin' and boiler tubes for ships and a hundred other items from brass.

"Some of this Texas copper would go all the way to Connecticut where there's been a bunch of famous rollin' mills and industries turnin' out Colts, cannon and such things almost since the United States set upon its own. Locomotives and cars need a lot of the metal."

They were spellbound by the Ranger's word picture and their imaginations were stirred as the tall man pointed out the value of the copper ores running under their range.

"And Farris smelled out the lode and the old mine as he and Chuckwalla followed it up!" growled Pirie. "They figgered they could run us off without much trouble."

"They've come close to it," said Jerry Walsh grimly.

Pirie agreed. "The Ranger saved my hide and my folks along with me. I'll be glad when that ammunition gets here."

"It's time Bunton was back," declared Lew Walsh.

THE SUN was coming up before calls announced the approach of a rider. Hatfield, Pirie and the Walshes went into the yard and watched as Bill Kettle, one of Pirie's cowboys, came slowly in, leading his pack horse.

Because Kettle was only seventeen, and thin with a youth's lack of spare fat, he looked worn to a frazzle, stained with dust and muck, and his face was scratched by thorns. As he slipped from his sweated saddle, white lines were under his red-rimmed eyes.

"Boss!" he mumbled. "I got through. But they hit us in Lampasas!"

"Where's Bunton?" demanded Pirie excitedly, gripping Kettles bony arm and shaking him. "Where's the other boys?"

"Bunton's done in. Moose Grogan's passed in his checks, too. Bunton started us off as we got loaded at Corrigon's, savvy? We was to wait for him at a grove south of Lampasas. Red and I got there first, then Abe and Neale come along. Neale told us he'd hardly left the store yard when shootin' begun and he saw Moose and Bunton go down but we had orders to get the ammunition through, no matter what. We waited a little while, hopin' Bunton and Moose might make it. Then a bunch of riders rushed us and we split up and run for it."

Lara Pirie hurried from the kitchen.

"Bill, where's Ab?" she demanded.

Kettle hung his head. Nobody would tell her, but she read the answer in their taut faces. Her father tried to put an arm around her for rough comfort but she turned and ran back to the kitchen, her slim, girlish figure bent with grief.

Hatfield stepped over and untied Kettle's load. There were boxes of Colt cartridges, a bag containing two shotguns and a rifle, with shells for the latter.

"Here comes another!" sang out Ike Walsh.

It was Abe Muller of the Square 4. He had saved his pack horse and they added another installment to their thin arsenal stores. Kettle had walked unsteadily off to get a drink of water and eat, then sleep,

for he was exhausted.

Muller was in the same state. Farris' killers had run him for miles through woods and brush. He knew nothing about the others except what Neale had said, and what he had seen when they had hastily split up in seeking to escape.

Half an hour later Frankie Neale rode in but without a pack horse. Pursued by the gunslingers his led horse had been hit and had fallen. Neale's mustang had gone lame but he had managed to elude his foes in the dark. It was Frankie who had looked back as he left Corrigon's and had seen Bunton and Grogan fall.

"There must have been thirty of 'em, Boss," he told Pirie. "I'd have fought 'em in Lampasas but Bunton had told us to run the ammunition through, no matter what. I'm sorry I missed out."

Red Thomas failed to appear. They decided that somewhere in the black chaparral he had caught an enemy bullet.

"We can hold on a while when they hit," said the Ranger, as they talked it over. "At least part of the ammunition came through."

"Yuh figger Farris will rush us?"

"I'd swear to it. He savvies now we must be short since we sent Bunton to Lampasas."

A pall had descended over the Square 4 as they mourned the loss of their young friends, Ab Bunton, Moose Grogan and Red Thomas.

Hatfield was restless. He had to know what Tazewell Farris was up to. Buck Robertson might be able to supply vital information, since the youth had been posted in Marble Falls to spy on the chief.

The Ranger knew that the best defense is a well-planned and smartly executed offensive, but first he had to spot the enemy forces and learn where to strike. He could not take too long a chance in leaving the Square 4, with the women and children, without sufficient forces on guard.

He saddled the sorrel, checked his guns, and spoke with Pirie.

"I'm goin' to run to town. Keep alert. I'll check up on Farris."

The tall officer moved over the range, toward the Colorado. The sun had turned golden, flooding the earth with brilliant light.

He saw small bunches of Square 4 steers here and there. Rawhide Arbuckle had stolen some of the cattle but had not cleaned off the range yet. Later, when Farris shoved out Pirie and the Walshes, the rustlers would hold full sway.

MORNING was well along when Hatfield sighted the distant river, beautiful in the clear light of day. Granite Mountain bulked huge, while a smudge of smoke marked Marble Falls.

The scintillating flash of the sun on metal took his roving eye. He slowed and watched ahead. A roll of dust marked the progress of a horseman coming his way so he hunted cover, finding it in a small patch of pecans not far from the bank of Granite Creek.

He sat his saddle, turned toward the line the rider was following. It might be Red Thomas or some other friend, and it might be an enemy.

When the galloping mustang carrying a bent figure was close enough, Hatfield recognized Old Heart 7 with Buck Robertson aboard. Buck was flogging full-tilt toward the Square 4. Hatfield started the gelding out of the grove and sang out to his young companion.

Buck jumped in his leather but, seeing who it was, veered toward him, quickly joining him. The lean youth was breathless, his face pink with excitement.

"Jim! Farris pulled in at Marble Falls this mornin' with a passel of gunhands. They got Ab Bunton."

"Is he alive?"

"Yeah. He don't seem hurt much—only knocked around some."

"Where they holdin' Bunton?"

"They throwed him into a tool shed behind *El Tigre*, and set a man on guard outside. Farris and his bunch are restin' up now at the inn. He wasn't in town when I got there, so I made myself at home and waited."

It was good news to learn that Ab Bunton was still alive. Hatfield thought over the situation. To return to the Square 4, marshal rescuers and hurry to Marble Falls would kill too much time. And unless the cowmen arrived in full force, Farris would have everything his way. The approach of such a large party would certainly be observed and the Farris crew would be waiting in ambush for them.

"I'd shore like to snatch Bunton," he said. "Mebbe Farris aims to use him for a hostage, otherwise he'd have shot him. Yuh ain't been spotted?"

"Nope, they don't savvy me. Farris and his men walked right by me when I was standin' in front of the Tiger."

"Huh! I can't show in town for they'd reckernize me. Tell yuh what. This is worth a fling. You go back and hire a buggy at the livery stable, Buck. Pick one with deep sides. And we'll need a mount for Bunton if we can bring him out."

They talked over the details as they swung toward the Colorado and crossed to the north bank. Nestling in the cedar-clad hills, as Marble Falls was, they could closely approach the town without showing themselves.

The Ranger and Buck worked up to a patch of cedars within a stone's throw of the settlement. Here Hatfield stopped while Buck went on. Soon he returned, driving a black buggy drawn by a rangy brown horse, and with a saddled mustang tied behind. From the public livery stable he had picked a route which allowed him to cut off the road out of sight of *El Tigre*, then reach the grove and his Ranger friend. "You shore come in might handy, Buck," drawled the Ranger.

They were close to the service buildings behind the Tiger and other structures on the east side of the Plaza, but the woods and a low mound hid them. Hatfield left the three saddled animals with dropped rein in the cedars and climbed into the buggy.

He slouched down in the seat. Unless someone looked directly in at the front the upper part of his body could not be seen, because of the side curtains and the overhang of the top. Buck sat forward, handling the ribbons. The buggy bumped over uneven ground until they could cut back to the highway, the roundabout route by which Buck had brought the vehicle to the grove.

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CHAPTER XV

A Bold Plan

LUMBERINGLY the deep-sided vehicle moved into the little settlement, with *El Tigre* on the right. Hatfield could watch through a small, diamond-shaped isinglass pane in the side curtain. A couple of Farris' bodyguard were on deck, scrutinizing passersby from rocking chairs on the tavern porch, but Farris himself was not in view. The gunslingers glanced at the buggy but, seeing only the slim youth driving it, paid no further attention as Buck kept on going.

There was a lane a few doors above *El Tigre* and Buck swung into it. Soon they reached the service street running behind the structures and Hatfield sighted a wide-set fellow in a corduroy suit and flat-brimmed hat, who stood at the closed door of the tool shed next the *El Tigre* stable. The sentry cradled a sawed-off, double-barreled shotgun in his blunt arms.

Now for it, thought the Ranger. He could not leave such a friend and ally as Ab Bunton in the lurch. Life or death, he must try to save the Pie rider. He touched his heavy Colts. One mistake, and all would die.

He realized that if Buck turned to the right on the service road it would front the buggy so that the Ranger would be disclosed to the alert guard at the prison shed. The wide-set gunhand had heard the creaking wheels and was looking their way.

"Keep goin' straight," ordered Hatfield quickly.

Buck guided the brown harness horse between a barn and a storage building and they passed out of the sentinel's range of vision.

"Now what?" he asked.

"We'll go around and come up at the side of the shed," said Hatfield.

Within a couple of minutes Buck was driving the buggy back toward the lane. From the tiny diamond-shaped window Hatfield could see the blank wall of the cedar-log structure, where they believed Bunton was being held.

As the brown horse came abreast of the mortised corner the wide-set man with the shotgun stepped out.

"What are we playin'?" he demanded. "Hide-and-seek?"

But he broke off, his rat-trap mouth snapping open as he found himself covered by the Ranger's Colt.

"No suh," replied Hatfield. "This is called 'Who's got the drop?' "

The sawed-off shotgun was an easily maneuverable weapon at close range. But the barrels were pointed off to one side and there was something about the grim, rugged officer which forced the guard to freeze in his tracks. He could see that the hammer spur of the revolver was held back under Hatfield's thumb.

Buck had his instructions. He was instantly in action, jumping from the far side of the buggy and running around the back.

In a moment he was at the plank door of the shed.

"It's locked, Jim!" he cried.

"Put yore shoulder to it and bust it in."

Buck drew back and hit the door hard. A padlock and hasp held it, but after two frontal attacks the wood splintered and Buck went flying through as the door banged open.

"Ab!" Hatfield heard the boy cry sharply. "Come on!"

The seconds seemed interminably long. At any instant Farris' agents might glance out and see what was going on behind *El Tigre*. But as Hatfield had hoped, many were asleep inside, resting after the night fight around Lampasas and the drive to Marble Falls.

There was a pause. Bunton's voice came from the shack.

"I'm tied hand and foot, Buck!"

They had counted on that and Buck had his hunting knife, which he made a habit of carrying with him. It did not take long to slash the rawhide cords holding the cowboy, though it was ticklish waiting, one eye on the sentry, the other on the back entry to *El Tigre*.

Then Buck came out, followed by Ab Bunton. The giant waddy was able to move under his own power although he was limping, and his face was swollen from bruises and scratches. His wide-set eyes were bloodshot from lack of sleep, his crisp light hair unbrushed, and his hat was gone. They had taken his boots away, too.

It was a critical moment. "Stay behind that cuss, Bunton," ordered the Ranger coolly. He did not want the excited Bunton to pass between his gun and the tough.

In jig time Bunton and Buck had climbed into the buggy, crowding the Ranger who had to watch the furious guard. The outlaw was cursing them, his face red with rage, but so far he had not dared resist.

"All right, hombre! Throw down that shotgun!"

HATFIELD was prepared to shoot if the fellow tried to swing the murderous weapon their way. The sentry straightened his arms and let go of the shotgun, which hit the ground hard several feet away. It tripped the cocked trigger of one barrel and the explosion roared in the yard, the flying buck going into the air.

"Move, Buck!" snapped Hatfield.

Buck whipped the brown horse around, the near front wheel scraping the side of the buggy as it made a sharp turn. They were off, with Buck laying the whip on the running mustang. Hatfield leaned far out, one foot on the metal step, Colt in hand.

"Hustle, hustle—this way!" bellowed the shed sentry. "Escape! Prisoner's escaped!"

Holding with one hand to a strut, Hatfield saw the wide-set gunslinger pop out from behind the shed, where he had taken cover as the rescuers swung to leave. He was still yelling for help and Farris' men were starting to pour from the rear door of *El Tigre*. The sentinel had pulled a revolver from his side holster and was taking aim at the careening buggy.

Hatfield lifted his thumb and his Colt pushed against his hand. The bullet must have sung close to the guard for he twitched and the slug from his gun was wide of the buggy by several feet. It was impossible to hold a steady bead with the stance he had and the bumping vehicle under him, and Hatfield had fired only to hold them back anyway.

He recognized three of Farris' men who ran in to help the wide-set gunman. Buck pulled a rein and the buggy swerved behind a square barn which furnished pro-

tection for the moment.

Ahead lay the cedar grove, but there was no road here and they crashed violently through shallow ditches and over rocks. Hatfield watched the rear, saw Farris' killers come streaming from *El Tigre,* weapons up as they rushed to the gaps to shoot after the fleeing fugitives.

"There's that Farris cuss!" he muttered, as he saw the tall figure of the red-faced chief.

The range was long for a pistol. Some of the enemy had carbines and were kneeling for better aim at the buggy. The right front wheel hit a sharp granite outcropping, cracked under the strain and the buggy slewed around in a cloud of rising dust. The brown horse tried to keep going and in his excitement succeeded in dragging the sagging vehicle on for yards as the Ranger, Buck and Ab Bunton were unceremoniously dumped out, piling one on the other.

"Unscramble!" gasped the Ranger, the wind jolted from his lungs.

Buck untangled himself, jumped to his feet and ran like a deer over the low mound into the cedars. Hatfield pulled Bunton erect and shoved him forward. Farris and his men were coming, pouring volleys at them.

Bunton was hardly able to put his weight on his bruised left leg. The Ranger kept swinging to reply with his Colt to the enemy fire. Bunton staggered over the rise and made the woods. Buck had his horse waiting and was on Old Heart 7 himself.

"Get goin', Buck!" roared Hatfield.

He threw himself over the top of the rise and there was Goldy among the brown trunks of the low-growing cedars. It was with immense relief that he swung his long leg over the sorrel's back and, pulling rein, started after Buck and Bunton.

They were at the river before Farris had enough of his men mounted for the pursuit. Crossing to the south bank, they could look back and see a score of raving, angry foes pounding to the ford.

FARRIS' riders kept coming as the trio galloped up the long, shallow slant from the Colorado and across the unfolding cattle range. Dust kicked up from pounding, shod hoofs. The Ranger lay back a hundred yards, as Ab Bunton coaxed the best speed he could from the hired mustang they had obtained in Marble Falls.

Old Heart 7 was able to do his bit as usual, carrying the light Buck. The sorrel could have forged ahead but Hatfield held his mount in, acting as rear guard for the other two.

An over-eager gunhand pelted too close, yelling and shooting. The Ranger watched him and finally raised his Colt. Taking a bead from the back of a running horse was difficult, but the tall officer was trained to it. The gunslinger's Stetson flew off his head a breath after the revolver banged, and the man lost his enthusiasm, slowing down and allowing his running mates to catch up.

For over an hour the dogged enemy trailed the fleeing three. Hatfield kept them bunched together by skillful use of his Colts, for the few on superior animals dared not risk drawing too near the Ranger. Some began to drop behind as their lathered, spur-gouged mustangs were unable to maintain the pace.

The hot sun beat upon them, baking the sweated horses, sapping the strength of the riders. Farris' men finally quit the chase, after sending a last futile volley after the trio.

Bunton, Hatfield and Buck slowed a bit to save their mounts, and made straight for the Square 4.

CHAPTER XVI

Counter

EXCITEDLY Lara Pirie ran from the ranchhouse and threw her arms around Ab Bunton's neck as the big cowboy dismounted in the yard. Bunton held her close, kissing her, while tears of joy ran down her cheeks.

"Ab—Ab!" she cried.

Hatfield felt amply repaid for the dangerous job he had just completed when he saw those two young people reunited. Pirie, the four Walsh brothers, and others gathered around Bunton and the tall Ranger to hear the exciting story.

Bunton had news about Farris, too.

"The sidewinder savvies we're short of ammunition," declared Bunton, as he stood with a strong arm around Lara. "It's hair in the butter. Farris aims to hit us here just as soon as he can get into position. He's sent orders to Rawhide Arbuckle and, with the gunslingers he picked up at Lampasas, he figgers he can wipe us off the map."

"Some of the ammunition got through," Hatfield told him. "We can hold 'em off a while, but it will be a tossup if it's a long siege. Farris ain't likely to quit now. He's gone too far, and he's determined to down us before we can muster any more help. All he needs to do is crush the Square Four and he wins."

Claude Pirie, the Walshes and the rest looked to the man from Austin. Ab Bunton went into the bunkhouse to clean up and Lara was fixing a meal for him, because he'd had little to eat since his capture.

"I don't see how Farris can make it tonight," the Ranger told Pirie and the other ranchers. "That crew who chased us out will have to get back to Marble Falls, report, and rest their horses. It may be tomorrer, which will be the earliest Farris can come at us."

"What's yore idea?" asked Pirie.

"If the two parties join up they'll have a mighty big, tough army, and they can hold us here long as Farris wants. But if we could sally out and bust up Rawhide's rustlers, we'd have the jump on Farris."

"How yuh aim to do that?" inquired Jerry Walsh.

"I been thinkin' it over. With around twenty picked men I could snake in and hit Arbuckle at that cave hideout. We could fake a frontal assault and some of us could go in the back way, through the airshaft I found."

It was a perilous undertaking, but they would listen to and follow this tall officer who gave them confidence. So while Bunton ate and rested, Hatfield was busy picking his party. He chose Lew and Ike Walsh, and young, hard-riding cowboys from the two outfits, men who could stand any pace. Buck Robertson begged for a place on the honor list, and the Ranger could not refuse his courageous young aide.

Hatfield's men grouped about the Ranger as he squatted in the yard and, with a sharp stick, drew diagrams in the dust, to illustrate the layout of Rawhide Arbuckle's hideout and the approaches to the rustler stronghold. He instructed the fighters what their rôles were to be, and as he was earnestly impressing them with the need for swift, unerring action, Ab Bunton came over and stood listening to the orders.

They could not afford to throw away even an hour of the precious time remaining to them, for Tazewell Farris would be pressing in. Hatfield was certain he must be back at the Square 4 by dark the following night. Otherwise the ranch would be to undermanned to hold off the enemy.

"I'm goin' along, Ranger," declared Ab.

Hatfield glanced at him briefly. He knew how Bunton must feel.

"I'll ask yuh one question, Ab. After what yuh been through can yuh keep up? It won't be easy."

"I'll stay with yuh," Bunton nodded.

"Come on, then. Yuh can stick with Lew Walsh when the frontal attack starts."

Fresh, strong mustangs were roped and saddled. Acting under Ranger command, the members of the force checked their weapons carefully, each adding a spare Colt or carbine for the battle shaping up. Ike Walsh, Hatfield, and four picked cowboys were equipped with short crowbars which could be carried on horseback while several bull's-eye lanterns were filled and brought along.

They swung away from the Square 4, anxious eyes watching their departure. Hatfield turned to wave to Claude Pirie and the home contingent in the yard.

THEY set a course which would permit them to approach behind wooded rises. Hatfield intended to move in by way of the blind trail near the brook, south of the hideout. He knew it would be practically impossible to travel the snaking paths without setting off an alarm. The rustlers kept sentinels on the job day and night.

There was always the chance the outlaws might have quit the cavern after the Ranger's visit, yet Hatfield counted on their over-confidence. From what he had learned, Farris and Rawhide were sure of themselves and would hardly expect

the cowmen to dare sally so far from home base at the Square 4.

Dark had fallen over the brooding central hills. They had taken a breather after coming within sight of the spot where the brook issued from the chaparral jungles.

"Keep it quiet, boys," urged the Ranger. "Don't let yore metal jingle. No talkin', no smokin'."

Hatfield led the party, coming in single file behind the golden sorrel. He had been through here before and a chunk of moon, with stars dotting the dome of the sky, gave enough light to proceed as they reached the rill. Dismounting, each man led his horse through and they came onto the cut trail. It was darker in here, and Hatfield trusted to the gelding to pick the way.

"S-s-t!"

The Ranger sent his low signal back, to warn them action was about to begin for he saw before him the tall cedar where the guard post was located.

A few paces farther along and a sharp challenge rang out.

"Halt!"

The startling stab of a bull's-eye beam swept the trail from the crude platform built in the limbs of the tree.

That light was an unwelcome surprise which the Ranger had not taken into account. It swept the trail and a load of buck could slash into the line of attackers with terrible effect. Hatfield reacted with flaming speed, his gun whipping up. He got off a shot, aiming at the center of the lamp.

It saved the situation, and he pulled hard on his rein, whirling the sorrel backward. The bandit in the tree had had to use his hands to maneuver the bull's-eye and the Ranger bullet had struck the glass, shattered the lamp and hit the man gripping the handle. A sharp screech told of this as the light suddenly went out.

A shotgun belched flame and metal but it was pointed down and missed the oncoming party entirely. Across the trail a carbine crackled, as the other guard tried for the horsemen he had glimpsed in the beam of the lantern.

Ab Bunton, the two Walsh boys and the Ranger ripped Colt bullets at the flash of the carbine. Then they drove on by, galloping full-tilt past the sentry post. Both rustlers were yelling, their voices tinged with pain. The carbine began cracking an alarm, three spaced explosions, as the wounded guard sought to warn his companions at the cavern.

"Take over!" ordered the Ranger, as Ab Bunton and Lew Walsh pressed up. "All right. Those goin' with me stand by."

Bunton and Lew hurried on toward the hideout. They knew that the alarm must have been heard at the cave, that Arbuckle and his crew would have awakened and be ready with their guns. Fifteen cowboys under Bunton and Lew Walsh drove hard to the edge of the clearing, jumped off their mustangs and took cover.

Hatfield waited back on the trail just past the junction of the two paths. Ike Walsh and four cowboys were with him. The roar of guns told him that many rustlers were at home, that the frontal assault had begun. He could see the flashes of the weapons on both sides and a red glow marking the campfire in front of the main cavern.

Hoarse, cursing challenges came from the outlaws, answered by Rebel yells of triumph from Bunton and his friends, who lay flat and sent their lead in, making a terrific noise, but keeping themselves down behind rocks or contours.

"Let's go, boys," said the Ranger.

They led their mounts into the side brush, shoving through by main force. With the sounds of their progress being drowned out in the hubbub in front of the hideout, they dropped rein and following the Ranger, making for the blowhole through which Hatfield had made his escape when he had been walled into the side shaft.

At last they reached the narrow entry behind the rustler den, carrying the short crowbars, a couple of bull's-eye lamps, and their sidearms. Hatfield climbed through the boulders and went in first, squeezing through the gap he had enlarged when he had come out of there. Ike Walsh came next, and in the constricted tunnel they crouched and listened. They could dimly hear the shots and cries of the fighting factions beyond.

REACHING the barrier which Arbuckle had had erected to cut him off from the cavern, Hatfield waited for his picked aides to gather beside him. He checked over the wall of small rocks,

clay and muck with his hands. There was a gap about three feet wide at the top, and it had partially caved in.

"They must have busted through to see if I'd checked out," he decided.

If they had bothered to push on they would have found the ventilator by which he had left. But the rustlers were sure of themselves and their power. They could not have been persuaded to believe that this small chink might be used against them by intrepid raiders.

They hardly needed the short crowbars which they wielded to enlarge the breach in the barrier. When it was made Hatfield went through and his men hurriedly followed. They drew their revolvers and stole to the point where the side shaft joined the main cavern.

Rawhide Arbuckle and his outlaws were hard at work as they poured lead out at Bunton's friends. The Ranger tactics had worked perfectly. He had held Rawhide's attention by the faked frontal assault while he came up in the rear.

A shaded lantern gave a little light by which weapons could be loaded. Peering around the bulge of the grayish chalcocite wall, Hatfield could see lines of the rustlers pushed against the sides of the cavern entrance as they answered the fire from the front. Rawhide Arbuckle was standing to the rear, in a safe spot, smoking a quirly as he watched the defense of his hideout.

Just behind the tall rustler chief crouched a shivering, stout figure. It was Chuckwalla Deets, trying to make himself small in a niche as bullets flew through the mouth of the cave and smacked into the ore.

Hatfield was hardly six jumps from Rawhide Arbuckle. It was dim in there but he could make out plenty of details—the open cases of ammunition, the spare weapons, the owlhoots holding the fort. Echoes of exploding guns roared through the mine.

The Ranger's Colt hammer was back under his thumb. He glanced around, making sure his handful of men were in position. Then, protected by the bulge, Hatfield took aim. Rawhide Ken Arbuckle was blissfully unaware of the threat at his back.

Hatfield raised his voice in a mighty shout which carried above the crashings of the battle.

"Reach, Arbuckle!"

Rawhide jumped violently, the cigarette flipping from his startled mouth as he whirled around. From where he stood he could see the tall Ranger and the levelled, steady pistol. Others in the cavern had heard the sharp command to surrender and were turning.

Chuckwalla Deets was horrified. Thinking himself in the safest possible position he found himself between two determined opponents. He squeaked with shrill panic and managed to pull himself in another inch or two.

"It's that big hombre!" he wailed. "I told yuh so!"

Arbuckle hardly believed his eyes, but he was a hardened outlaw. His swift gaze touched the silver circle pinned to Hatfield's shirt now. It was an emblem hated and feared by such men as Rawhide Arbuckle.

"Ranger!" he howled.

CHAPTER XVII

Half the Battle

NEVERTHELESS Arbuckle thought he could make it. He threw himself violently forward, hoping to slide past the angle at which the Ranger, in the narrow tunnel, could fire. He rolled, came up with his revolver blazing. A slug bit a chunk from the edge of the wall only inches from the crouching Hatfield.

The tall officer pushed out and raised his thumb from his hammer. He heard the whistle of Rawhide's second hasty try, but it did not disturb his aim. The heavy revolver exploded and Arbuckle shuddered, his arm dropping as he rolled over on his side.

Outlaws were swinging to blast the Ranger who drew back as a volley came his way. A quick thinker kicked over the single lantern, plunging the cavern into blackness.

"Light up, Buck!" order Hatfield.

They had brought bull's-eyes. As a wick took hold, Hatfield pushed the lamp past the turn with his Colt muzzle so it

shone on the gunslingers. Chuckwalla was wailing in anguished defeat and begging for mercy at the top of his voice. He dared not leave his niche.

Bunton's contingent kept the entry covered with lead. The rustlers were bunching up, a few throwing metal at the hidden fighters behind the Ranger.

"Throw down, rustlers!" shouted Hatfield.

His gun spoke, and the men with him opened fire. Men were hit, and confused yells dominated the cave. A few ran for the other side shaft but Hatfield's booming pistol checked this retreat.

"Come on, Bunton!" bellowed the Ranger. "We got 'em all snaffled.

Panicked killers threw down their weapons, hugging the dirt. With Rawhide Arbuckle out of the scrap, and trapped between two fires, the rustlers quit in droves as Ab Bunton and the main crew whooped it up and charged the front entrance. Buck Robertson, Ike Walsh and the cowboys backing up Hatfield jumped into view, their guns going. It was easy to subdue the handful who tried to keep fighting. Resistance melted away.

Buck lighted another lantern. Colt up and trailed by his helpers, Hatfield crossed the main cavern. Bunton and the rest pushed in through the main door.

"Cut up some of their lariats so's we can tie the cusses, Buck," ordered the Ranger.

The prisoners were quickly secured. The victors lighted cigarettes, relaxing after the bold coup. The Ranger had disposed of half of Farris' powerful army!

Jim Hatfield, his silver star set on his shirt, hurried for the Square 4. Buck Robertson rode Old Heart 7 a few jumps behind his tall friend on the golden sorrel, while Chuckwalla Deets, tied on a rustler mustang taken from the corral near the hideout, was in between the two comrades, his horse led by a rope fastened to Goldy's saddlehorn.

Ab Bunton, Ike and Lew Walsh and others were coming, but half a dozen cowboys had been left at the old mine to guard the trussed captives. The outlaws would be dealt with later when there would be time to run them in and turn them over to the local authorities at Lampasas.

And at the bandit stronghold the victors had seized ammunition and weapons to see them through the expected attack by Tazewell Farris and his toughs!

En route to rejoin Claude Pirie and his allies, Hatfield questioned the crushed Chuckwalla.

"Yes, Ranger, I did fetch a message from Mr. Farris to Rawhide," admitted Deets. "The rustlers was to join up with the chief and his men on Granite Creek a couple miles from the Square Four, suh. Arbuckle was all ready to start at dawn. They were just waitin' so's to make a good connection with the boss. Yore gettin' away worried Rawhide some but he never figgered yuh'd dast come after 'em the way yuh did. We s'posed yuh was mighty short not only on men but on ammunition. Word come through about it."

Chuckwalla had completely surrendered, not only in body but in spirit. He was miserably eager to help the law and hoped thereby to save himself from dire punishment.

"I'm no gunhand, suh," he chattered. "Just drop the reins on the ground. I'll stay put." He was tamed, and admitted it without reservations.

HATFIELD needed a rest, a few hours in which to recuperate, for he knew the fight was not yet won. Farris could hire and command plenty of other guns, once he found out that Rawhide Arbuckle was finished. He might put off his strike at the Square 4 until he mustered further strength.

According to Deets, and the Ranger had no reason to doubt the frightened miner, the rendezvous of Rawhide Arbuckle and Farris was to take place just before dark the following evening. As Hatfield made for the Square 4, the center of local resistance to the cruel ambitions of Tazewell Farris, he planned how he might best ensnare the chief and the tough gunslingers under Farris' command. It was not Ranger policy to sit back and permit an enemy to strike at will—not if this could be avoided.

Hatfield had seen to it that the rustler mustangs were captured and held. He hoped that no stray fugitive from Rawhide Arbuckle's band would break out and warn Farris of what had occurred at the hideout. Knowing such gentry, he believed that if any had been fortunate enough to escape the law's closing net,

that one would take to the tall timber and save himself.

Before dawn broke the Ranger drooped rein in the Square 4 yard. Claude Pirie, Jerry Walsh, Lara and others gathered anxiously about him, staring the the crestfallen Chuckwalla and questioning Hatfield as to the outcome of the night battle. He reassured them.

Then Buck Robertson rode in and wearily dropped off Old Heart 7. Soon Ab Bunton and other cowboys drifted home and those who had remained to guard the ranch learned all that had occurred.

Chuckwalla Deets was pulled from his mustang. He was docile as they led him to the bunkhouse where he was to remain under guard. Women set to work, cooking a hot meal for the victors. Tired fighters stoked up and regaled listeners with accounts of the big fight against the outlaws.

Buck and the Ranger did more than their share of damage to the welcome viands. Then they turned in, and were quickly asleep as the new dawn blazed the sky. . . .

Near sunset Hatfield, with his field glasses watched from the wooded ridge on the east side of Granite Creek. He was some two miles north and about a mile east of the Square 4, with the stream below him. Pirie's burned-out home was south of him.

A rider came toward him and he recognized Buck Robertson who had been sent on a scout toward the Colorado. When Buck came up, he threw himself from his saddle.

"Farris is comin', Jim!" he said anxiously. "He's got around forty men with him. They're mighty well-armed with carbines, shotguns and Colts."

"*Bueno,*" said the Ranger. "Sounds as though Farris don't savvy yet about Rawhide."

He moved back off the brush-fringed crest to tell Pirie and the others to make ready for the fight. With Arbuckle's rustlers out of the picture, they had felt justified in leaving only a skeleton force to guard the Square 4, while Pirie, the four Walsh brothers and the ranchers' cowboy crews had moved to the rendezvous, led by Ranger Jim Hatfield.

Chuckwalla Deets, who had blurted out the vital information about Farris' plans, stood blinking unhappily at his tall captor. Chuckwalla's teeth sounded like castanets for he feared Farris. And yet he had developed an even healthier awe of the officer.

"Hear that, Chuckwalla?" said Hatfield. "Yore old boss is comin' up. I guess he left his butterfly net home this time!"

Farris had posed as a bug hunter to screen his true object in the central hills. Now he was coming to crush his rancher opponents, men who had dared to fight for their lives and property against his ambitions and dream of ill-gotten wealth.

The horses of the men waiting in ambush for him, had been left, saddled and ready, behind the ridge, out of sight of the route Farris should follow from Marble Falls. Holders had been stationed with the mustangs.

"Look here, Chuckwalla," drawled the Ranger, impressing his instructions upon Deets. "Yuh savvy what yuh're to do. I told yuh before. Don't forget. When Farris is close enough yuh're to rise up and sing out to him. Draw him in. Tell him Rawhide is waitin' so he'll veer his party to these woods."

"He'll drill me for shore when he finds out I've doublecrossed him," whined Chuckwalla.

"I won't let him," guaranteed Hatfield. "And remember every breath yuh take while yuh're coaxin' Farris in, that I'll have a dead bead between yore shoulderblades with my rifle. If yuh try to give him warnin' I'll pull trigger."

Chuckwalla shuddered. "No, no! Yuh can trust me, so help me."

Hatfield had fully realized that a band such as Tazewell Farris was leading toward the waiting ranchers could do tremendous execution in a free-for-all gunfight. The killers were apt at shooting from horseback, and they wasted little ammunition. They could get off a surprising number of shots per minute.

THE Ranger had no intention of placing in jeopardy these men of the Colorado River range who were under his protection. He was aware that professional gunhands, while expert with their weapons, were also realists, who could quickly size up a situation and as quickly know on which side of the fence to jump.

Hatfield nodded to Claude Pirie, who

was squatting nearby.

"Better get yore bunch mounted and down in position. And Ab, you can move yore cowboys up the line. Don't show yoreselves till I signal, whatever you do, and keep yore hosses quiet."

The Walshes and the remainder of the force were staying in the center with the Ranger. Behind them the sun was enlarging, reddening as it drew closer to the western mountains. The range was taking on a glorious rose-tinted light and flights of birds winged along the creek. There was a warm, sweet scent in the air.

Pirie was leading his contingent down the ridge. They were afoot, each with his horse's reins in hand, and they kept behind the natural land contours and the fringed crest. Ab Bunton and several cowboys from the Square 4 and Pie were moving south in the same fashion.

Hatfield drew in a deep breath. He had managed through shrewd figuring and hard fighting to whittle Farris down to size. Now came the real test. One thing he knew, he dared not permit Farris to slip through his fingers. Above all, he intended to force this brutal man to an accounting.

Buck was squatting near the Ranger's elbow. Chuckwalla was still shivering, every now and then casting a scared look the Ranger's way. He had no stomach for this kind of affair.

Peering through a clump of chaparral atop the crest, Hatfield saw the van of Farris' forces slowly approaching. The trail south ran along the ridge and if Farris kept on as he was going this would bring him almost upon the hidden ranchers.

Out front with Farris' men were four horsemen spread across a two-hundred-yard line. They wore black coats, dark pants, and shiny spurred boots. Straight-brimmed hats were strapped low on their heads, and each had a carbine resting at the ready across his saddle pommel. Hard eyes ceaselessly roved from side to side and the riders held well out from patches of woods and brush which might be ambush spots. They were Farris' scouts.

Along each side were more spaced outriders, protecting the main band in the hollow square. The watching Ranger recognized the red-faced, lean Farris near the center of the party. Farris wore black as his men did. He was on a fine black horse of Arab strain, longer of leg and body than the run-of-the-mill mustang.

The advance man on the right glanced at the crest not far from the spot to which Claude Pirie had been despatched. Hatfield swore to himself and his grip tightened on his carbine. He feared some sound or unusual stirring might have roused the scout's suspicion. But then they came on, the dust rising from under the beating hoofs.

The Ranger could make out Farris' long nose, the shine of the chief culprit's pale eyes. Farris said something to a companion, one of the bodyguard on his left.

The quartet of scouts had come abreast of Hatfield when the Ranger nudged Chuckwalla Deets.

CHAPTER XVIII

Duel

MORE interminable seconds ticked off. Deets seemed frozen to the earth, paralyzed with fear. He would not budge and Hatfield dared not speak, for the enemy would hear him.

He poked his rifle muzzle into Chuckwalla's ribs and this did the trick. Deets jumped up and uttered a shrill hail. The round-paunched miner showed himself on the crest. He waved his arms as he jumped up and down. "Don't shoot, boys! It's me—Chuckwalla! Hey, Mr. Farris, tell 'em not to shoot!"

The scouts had quickly whipped around to face him. Their carbines came up and covered Deets. It was a ticklish moment as the Ranger waited to see if Farris could be tricked.

Farris recognized his aide. He snapped orders and the band veered toward the wall of brush where Hatfield crouched. Deets remembered the strict orders the officer had impressed upon him and he kept singing out.

"Rawhide's here, Boss! He's waitin' for yuh with all his men. They're camped down by the creek."

"We're coming," answered Farris.

At this psychological moment Farris and his fighters relaxed since they believed their rustler allies were at hand.

Surely Arbuckle would have cleared the way and kept it checked. The formation broke as the gunhands eagerly pressed in to join Rawhide Arbuckle.

Hatfield glanced back and made a low clicking with his lips. Buck Robertson took it up and the four Walsh brothers with their cowboys became alert.

Suddenly Hatfield's shrill Rebel yell pierced the evening air as he jumped to his feet. Armed ranchers and cowboys lashed to the crest, carbines and shotguns leveled through the brush on Farris's followers.

The Ranger's mighty figure showed for an instant. Light glinted off the silver star on silver circle fastened to his shirt. Tazewell Farris knew him, realized that the tall man was a member of that famous force upholding Texas law.

For breaths of time nothing seemed to happen. The world apparently stood still as Farris and his killers, shocked to the core, found that they were ambushed.

Chuckwalla Deets, self-preservation dominating his soul, yelped and hurled himself backward into the chaparral. He came rolling over the crest, his panic showing in bearded, contorted face.

Farris was a quick thinker, had guessed at once that Deets had betrayed him, and in his fury had thrown up his carbine. Two slugs kicked up dirt just behind Chuckwalla, who flattened into a hollow and quivered there out of immediate harm's way.

Hatfield's gun had snapped at Farris. The man's black hat flew off his head and he ripped at his reins, whirling his powerful mount. "Fight!" he screamed. "Fight! Kill them!"

He needed time to back off, make his escape, and he could only gain it if his hired gunfighters sacrificed themselves against the Ranger's line.

Rearing mustangs, startled by the rapping of guns as the battle began, protected Farris from Hatfield's aim, and then the officer was busy with the killers immediately in front of him.

Crackling volleys rose, but piercing yells from the north rang out and a line of riders led by Claude Pirie flogged from the crest and swung out in a wide, circling hook. More shouts directed attention to Ab Bunton and his squad, galloping to join with Pirie and cut off escape.

Farris had dug in his spurs. Low over the beautiful black, the chief of the outlaws flashed straight away from the scene. Pirie tried for him with a pistol and so did Bunton, but so swiftly had Farris acted and so superior was his mount that he streaked through before the gap could be closed.

The cold-eyed gunslingers could estimate their danger. They might have turned as had Farris and fought away from the crest where they were covered by the center of Hatfield's forces, but they had been surrounded before they could pull themselves together. Only a handful had managed to follow Farris before Pirie and Bunton joined Hatfield, their men facing in with weapons raised and cocked.

One of Farris' bodyguards cursed in disgust and threw away his shotgun. Another followed the example as they saw their boss on the run, leaving them to the Ranger's mercy. The hirelings who had been collected at Lampasas would not sacrifice their lives in a hopeless, senseless gesture.

HANDS rose as guns were dropped. The Ranger knew then that he had won and he hurried out to take charge. The cowed enemy, under rancher muzzles, surrendered and dismounted.

Buck Robertson was grinning widely as he picked up discarded arms and placed them in a pile. Others assisted and everyone was busy for a time as the prisoners were herded together.

Jim Hatfield stared through the rising dust. He could see Farris' figure diminishing in the distance as Farris ran for it. The Ranger whistled shrilly, and the golden sorrel came to him. "I'll be back, Buck!" he called as he mounted.

Hatfield rode out, pausing to speak to Claude Pirie who was closing in with his men. "Take over," said the Ranger. "I'm goin' after Farris."

Pirie's eyes shone with triumph. "Yuh did it, Ranger!'

Hatfield waved and picked up speed, getting after Farris. There were four more who had backed off in time to clear the closing jaws of the trap but they had split to ride in as many directions, every man for himself. The Ranger had kept an eye on Farris who was surging over the rolling range as fast as he could flog and gouge the black horse.

Not much more light remained. In the darkness Farris could elude him and Hatfield could not permit that. The evil brain which had planned to snatch the central hills from their owners could devise another brutal scheme in another place.

The sorrel responded to the Ranger's low urging. He picked up more and more speed, tearing in a magnificent burst after Farris. Dust hung in the air, marking the trail, and fresh clouds rolled under the flying hoofs of the golden gelding. "Go after him, Goldy!" murmured Hatfield.

They were picking up yard after yard. Farris looked over his shoulder and saw the Ranger coming. The sun was behind Hatfield and about to disappear.

At a hundred yards, Farris opened fire with a revolver. The black was lathered and slowing as the powerful sorrel bounded nearer and nearer, well aware of what was required of him. Whistling slugs sang in the air past the Ranger but at such jolting pace steady aim was impossible.

Colt in hand, Hatfield closed in for the duel.

Farriss's crimson face was twisted with hate. He kept trying with his pistol, determined to knock Hatfield from the sorrel's back. The Ranger coolly held his fire but gripped his heavy Colt, the hammer spur held back under his thumb joint.

He could see the streaks of bloody lather on the flanks of the black. The light was nearly gone as the handsome animal, driven beyond his strength by Farris's whip and goading, stumbled and nearly went down, while the golden gelding flashed in.

Farris hurled himself from his saddle, whirling. Hatfield heard his raving.

"Hunh-hunh! A Ranger, eh? You'll pay for this, I promise you!"

With careless grace Hatfield slid off Goldy, face to face with his enemy.

"Drop it, Farris!" he ordered. "I want yuh for the killin' of Pirie's cowboy, Easy Naylor. Deets saw yuh shoot him in the back. And yuh've plenty else to answer for."

Farris hesitated only a breath. Chuckwalla Deets would tell everything he knew about his former employer and in a court of law Farris would have no chance. Hatfield saw Farris meant to shoot.

The Ranger's thumb raised off the hammer. Farris' pistol explosion seemed joined to that of Hatfield's gun, but the tall officer stood erect while Farris shuddered, his arm dropping. A plume of dust kicked off between Hatfield's feet, marking the spot where Farris' bullet had struck.

Farris' head snapped down, he lost all volition and sank to the grass clumps. The grim, rugged Ranger, gun up, stepped over and checked him, staring down at a dying man as night fell over the land.

* * * * *

THE happiness that leaped into Anita Robertson's lovely eyes told Jim Hatfield how welcome he and Buck were as they reached the cottage in Austin. She kissed Buck and smiled on the tall Ranger.

It was hard for a woman to remain at home, wondering what was happening to loved ones who had ridden forth to battle. Perhaps, thought Hatfield, it was more difficult than for those in the thick of the fight. He knew that Anita's heart was immensely relieved at sight of them.

"We had a swell time, Sis!" cried Buck. "Anything to eat in the house? I'm starvin'."

Buck was bursting with the story of the campaign in the central hills. Hatfield remained at the cottage for a time, but he had to report to McDowell downtown. He mounted the golden sorrel and, waving to Anita, who stood in the doorway, rode off toward headquarters.

Captain Bill, too, was delighted to see him. He listened intently to the Ranger's terse, official report, but he could read between the lines and picture what had happened in the central mountains.

"A fine job!" he boomed. "I savvy an hombre in town who will buy that copper ore from Pirie and the Walshes. He's an honest dealer and they'll pick up enough to repair the damage Farris and Rawhide Arbuckle done, with plenty to boot."

The immense state posed many problems of law enforcement. McDowell was always short of Rangers and he had only one Hatfield. But something was troubling the old Chief, and it was not long until the story came out.

"I'm ready, suh, and so is Goldy," said Hatfield, when he had heard it. He was never so satisfied as when on a perilous mission.

Facts filed in his alert, orderly mind, the tall officer again rode off, carrying the law to Texas.

SPUR of the moment

By RAY HUMPHREYS

Chuck had about eight hundred pounds of equine dynamite in his noose

FIFTEEN minutes ago Chuck Hanes had his head in the clouds. Now he didn't feel so good. He squirmed in the saddle as he looked down into the troubled face of Old Man Meeker, his neighbor.

"Yep," said Old Man Meeker, who, in turn, had his watery eyes fixed on the gaunt, lifeless body of a black horse stretched out in the corral. "Old Cap's gone, Chuck—and I swanny I don't know what I'm goin' to do! Twelve miles to Conifer an' I can't walk back and forth there for any supplies, account my crippled foot. An' I can't raise no crops without a horse. Maybe I should have died!"

Chuck Hanes Believed in Helping His Neighbor!

Chuck's blue eyes were moist in sympathy. He felt embarrassed, seeing how he was dressed up and had fifteen dollars in his pocket.

"Yuh—yuh ain't got money to buy another horse, Mr. Meeker?"

"Money?" Old Man Meeker shook his head sadly. "About two dollars and eighteen cents, to be correct, Chuck. I just been livin' from hand to mouth, as yuh know. I guess you been doin' the same, out here on these scorched prairies. No, I can't buy another horse."

Chuck's face grew longer. He stuck one hand into a pocket, caressed the three five-dollar bills there with calloused fingers. He had wrested that money from his own parched acres after months of hard work and frugal living. And he had a place for that money. He was headed into Conifer to plank it down as an initial payment on a ring for Doreen. He had anticipated this day for months, and now—

"Reckon a fairly good horse broke to drive and ride would be around fifty to sixty bucks, at least," he muttered hopelessly.

"Least," acknowledged Old Man Meeker gloomily. "I paid eighty for Old Cap twelve years ago." The old man tore his eyes from the dead horse and looked up at Chuck for the first time. "Gee, Chuck," he continued, "you got your Sunday clothes on—and them fancy spurs—"

Chuck felt worse. He nodded, jiggling his reins.

"Yeah—goin' into town for the first time in three weeks, Mr. Meeker. Well, I'll be seein' yuh later. Adios!"

Chuck galloped away from there in a big hurry. He thought that maybe he'd feel better the more distance he placed between himself and Old Man Meeker's tragedy. But things seemed to work just the opposite. He got sorrier for the old rancher and angrier at himself the further he rode.

"Here I am, going into town like a lit-up Christmas tree to buy a diamond ring, on time, for a girl who maybe won't even look at it," he groaned, "while Old Man Meeker stands out there looking extermination right in the face. No money, no horse to ride or work, crippled and without a friend in the world, unless'n it's me! I'm a fine neighbor!"

He glanced down at the fancy spurs on his boots. He'd purchased them years before, in happier times. They were just for show. He'd never used them on the half-wild pinto mustang he rode. He had put them on today, along with his best shirt and hat, to sort of impress Doreen.

"If Doreen wasn't the sheriff's daughter maybe I would of made more headway with her," he muttered, frowning. "She's got a armload of fellows, I suppose, and she just seems to tolerate me. The sheriff figures I'm loco staying out there on the homestead instead of working for wages, but when irrigation comes to this land I'll be sitting pretty. Meanwhile, maybe I'm just a fool—and maybe also, poor Old Meeker dies because he hasn't a friend in the world—"

Chuck shook himself vigorously, straightened in the saddle.

"No," he said, seeming to make up his mind suddenly. "Meeker isn't going to die. I'm getting him a horse, by gosh!"

The decision made, Chuck felt better. He could see the raven-haired, bright-eyed Doreen, the flashing smile, the dimpled cheeks—even though he tried to banish the image. Well, she didn't know anything about the contemplated ring purchase, thank goodness. He had written her he'd be in but he hadn't mentioned the ring. The ring could wait. Old Meeker couldn't wait for a horse.

REACHING Conifer, Chuck rode straight for the stockyards at the lower end of Main street. He gripped the fifteen dollars in his pocket, and winced as he faced his problem.

"Fifteen bucks will just be a poor down payment on a horse," he groaned. "I'll have to pledge more payments, regular payments, and maybe I'll never get that ring business started at all."

He pulled up at the stockyards.

"But then, like as not, Doreen would refuse it, anyway!"

He knew Flanders, the dealer at the yards, and Flanders knew him.

"Well, well, Chuck, all dressed up fitten to kill, eh?" cried the dealer. "Like as not yuh come in to buy yourself a real saddler, maybe tradin' in that paint broomtail yuh're ridin'?"

Chuck shook his head slowly. "No, Mr. Flanders. This broomtail is doing me for a long time to come. I want to see a work

horse. One that can be rode, too, and that's real gentle, and that ain't too expensive!"

The dealer nodded, signaling Chuck to follow him. A half dozen horses stood in a side pen. They were big horses, not cayuses, and there were harness marks visible on several of them.

"From the low country," said Flanders. "Big boys, true workers, well broke. Yore pick for a hundred."

Chuck blanched. "A hundred dollars!"

"Sure, horses are up. These kind are scarce, too. What was you expectin' to pay?"

"Maybe sixty," said Chuck, and Doreen and the engagement ring seemed farther away than ever now, "with about fifteen dollars down and—"

"Whoa up a minute!" cut in Flanders, hoarsely. "I ain't sellin' good stock on no time to any Blue Mesa homesteader! Not on yore life! Fifteen dollars—why, say—Tell yuh what. I'll sell yuh one of them range colts yonder for fifteen bucks, seein' it's you."

Chuck eyed the animals in the other pen warily. They were wild-eyed, shaggy devils, with matted manes and tails. One of them would kill Old Man Meeker. It would be plain murder.

Flanders grinned at Chuck. "Yuh bought that paint yuh're ridin' out of such a bunch," he said. "Yuh could take another and break him out—to ride and work—and you can't find nothing else for fifteen dollars in Colorado!"

Chuck stared, unseeing. He was thinking. Maybe he could break out such an animal for himself, and give Old Meeker the pinto. The pinto was fairly trained, reasonably gentle, as long as one didn't fool with him.

Yes, that *was* an idea.

"Yuh won't take my money as a down payment on one of those big boys yonder?" he asked, softly. He expected the answer he got.

"Nope—never," said Flanders.

"I'll take one of the fuzztails," said Chuck recklessly. Gone now, he thought, not only Doreen and the ring and his fifteen dollars, but his pinto and all his spare time for many weeks to come.

"Throw yore rope over the one you want," said Flanders, holding out his hand for the money. "They're all sort of spooky —never had a hand on 'em—but they're good stock. Come from over Durango way."

Chuck got his pinto, rode into the pen, limbering his rope. He ran a quick eye over the lot. Not much choice. He picked a blaze-faced bay, possibly the flashiest of the lot. He threw. And the next minute he realized he had about eight hundred pounds of equine dynamite in his noose.

FLANDERS helped him get out of the pen with his purchase.

"Couple of years from now yuh won't know that horse," the dealer yelled comfortingly.

"Couple of days from now maybe you won't know me," said Chuck.

No sooner had he said that than his fears were realized, in a big way. The bay bronc snorted and plunged the full distance of the lariat, almost jerking Chuck's pinto off its feet. Chuck urged the pinto forward, trying to get some slack in the rope. The bay reared, pawed the air and fell over to one side. It was up again, quick as a cat, and there was another lunge and a shock as the rope tightened.

"He's goin' to have a time gettin' that outa town!" Flanders said, putting Chuck's money in his wallet.

Chuck knew he was in trouble. Lots of it. But he wasn't discouraged. He played the wild colt like he would play a fighting trout. He gave it all the line he could, constantly urging his pinto in closer, making the bay outlaw spin and whirl and plunge to the limit. The sooner the horse wore itself out at the yards, Chuck figured, the easier it would be to take up Main Street and on out into the open.

The colt bounced like a cork on a torrent; circled, ducked, dodged, so that Chuck, swinging, backing, advancing with it, soon had himself in a sweat and his pinto in a lather. The bay squealed and thrashed out with its unshod heels and fell more than once, but Chuck stuck with it. At length, puffing, the bay stood still, with far-braced feet, and looked hard at Chuck.

Chuck grinned back at it. "Now," he gasped, "I guess yuh know yuh ain't losin' me, son. Supposin' we just take it easy and get out of here?"

CHUCK swung the pinto, surreptitiously taking up all the slack in the rope he dared. Sooner than he had hoped he was jogging up the street with the colt behaving fairly well only seven or eight feet away, not close enough to strike Chuck in a sudden frenzy. Chuck sighed. He realized that there was no stopping now to visit with Doreen, not with a bay cyclone on the end of his rope. He was angry with himself for not stopping before buying the colt.

"If I had I might never have bought a horse for Meeker," he muttered. "If Doreen had given me a big, dimpled smile —gosh, I might have weakened and gone and plunked that dough down at the jewelry store. Maybe, in another six months, I can save up—"

The bay colt snorted and lurched, and Chuck, jerked out of his reveries, saw the girl in the blue dress hurrying along the sidewalk.

"Chuck!" she called, waving, and although Chuck did open his mouth to answer, no words came.

The bay, plunging to the right, took the length of the lariat and the pinto sideslipped at the shock. Instinctively Chuck tightened his grip on his mount and, in the confusion, one of his fancy spurs stunned the pinto. There was an immediate eruption. The pinto seemed to buckle up. He jumped to the left, with a "whoosh" that jolted Chuck's teeth. The bay colt, circling, came around fast, so that Chuck had to yank the paint savagely to prevent the burning rope from catching a leg.

At that second, in the blur of the equine pinwheel, another rider loomed—and before Chuck could do a thing the singing rope had snipped the newcomer from his saddle and set him down hard on the street. There was instant commotion. The newcomer's horse bolted, bowling over a citizen. The saddle girth on Chuck's pinto ripped, and Chuck and pinto parted company, Chuck going with the saddle for a few feet. He fell almost on top of the stranger.

The pinto, with a defiant whinny, scrambled into a fast pivot and tore up the street, while the bay colt, dragging Chuck's saddle, vanished across the sidewalk and between two buildings. People appeared as if from nowhere. Doreen was the first to reach the dazed Chuck.

"Chuck, what in all the world!" she cried, and there was mingled anger and surprise in her tone. "I never saw—"

Another familiar figure came within Chuck's bewildered gaze. It was Doreen's father. And the sheriff was really hot and bothered.

"What's the idea of stagin' a fool rodeo right on Main Street?" he cried, jabbing at Chuck with a long finger. "Look at this gent here. Yuh almost killed him!" The sheriff stooped to assist the stranger to his feet. "Reckon yuh're one of the guests from the Bendemeer Dude Ranch, sir," went on the sheriff, "judgin' from yore togs. I'm downright sorry that this accident happened."

"What's the trouble, son?" came another voice and Chuck turned his aching head to see Old Man Meeker himself. "I got a lift into town with a feller," went on Old Meeker. "I thought maybe I could get the sheriff here to let me go to the poor farm, seein' I'm ruined. But what's happened to yuh, Chuck? Yuh look sick—"

Chuck was sick. He put a hand to his throbbing head.

"I—I got throwed," he answered, slowly. "Yuh see, Mr. Meeker, I got worried over yore horse dyin' so I took all the money I'd saved for gettin' a ring for Doreen, and bought a wild colt. I meant to break the colt and give you my pinto, seein' you had to make a livin', but I got sort of messed up here an'—"

"That's him!" came a whoop, and a man Chuck recognized as Mr. Swartz, the town jeweler, came busting up into the crowd and laid violent hands on the stranger the sheriff had just helped to his feet. "This is the man that just gave me a rubber check for a $200 ring, Sheriff! I run to the bank and found out the check was no good. Further, they've got another check down there he passed yesterday in Olathe . . ."

"Bless my stars!" cried Old Man Meeker.

Doreen dropped to her knees, her arms around Chuck.

"Chuck, darling, I—I never knew you were so noble!" she cried and her tone made Chuck flush happily. "I don't care about the ring. It can wait."

Mr. Swartz let out a bellow. "I'll get

you a ring, Chuck—here, you can have this one the sheriff just took off this crook. You can start payin' me next year—two years from now! Yuh're a smart young fellow—and—here, take this ring. That's it. Now use it right!"

The sheriff cleared his voice.

"Sure," he boomed, not to be outdone, "and as far as Mr. Meeker is concerned, I'll loan him one of my horses. I got too many, anyhow. Yeah, I'll loan him a team, by gum! And as for you, Chuck, yuh're a heck of a lot smarter than I ever thought. I'm proud to have yuh in the family!"

Chuck, slipping the ring on Doreen's finger, grinned.

"If you hadn't waved and scared the colt," he murmured, "and I hadn't forgot and dug a spur into my pinto, I wouldn't be in heaven now!"

"In the family, not heaven," Doreen corrected, whispering in his ear.

"It's all the same," said Chuck, and then, despite the gaping ring of spectators, he kissed Doreen.

Roundup of Next Month's Headliners!

WHEN violent death strikes from every direction in a new mining camp, Ranger Jim Hatfield goes into action with guns and brains to bring to justice a vicious schemer who plans to plunder all he surveys—in THE WASTELAND EMPIRE, next month's smash-packed novel by Jackson Cole. It's a mystery epic of the gold country that will hold you spell-bound! Look forward to one of the year's finest reading treats.

EVERY Long Sam Littlejohn fan—and who isn't one?—will like next month's story about this grand character, LONG SAM FLIES A FLAG, by Lee Bond. In this splendid yarn, Long Sam finds it's time to catch up with a dangerous enemy when he discovers that Brad Fernan has changed the course of the Rio Grande in order to cheat a Mexican land owner.

SWIFT action was the forte of John B. Jones, famous Texas Ranger whose lightning guns brought rapid justice to the lawless! The true story of this fabulous law officer is told by Harold Preece in PISTOL PACIFIER FROM HELL'S HILLS, the next in our series of stories about famous Texas Rangers—coming next month.

THRILLS galore in our current Western companion magazines—TRIPLE WESTERN, GIANT WESTERN, EXCITING WESTERN, MASKED RIDER WESTERN, WEST, THRILLING RANCH STORIES, THRILLING WESTERN, POPULAR WESTERN, RANGE RIDERS WESTERN, THE RIO KID WESTERN, and RODEO ROMANCES. On sale at all newsstands—get acquainted with them all for the best in Western fiction!

"I'll get him, Sheriff!" shouted Graham as his gun roared

Right Busy Evening

By SAM BRANT

THE oil lamp on the battered old desk sputtered and Sheriff Buck Baker leaned back in his chair, strangely weary for so young a man. Through the open windows came the night sounds of the little cowtown, but to Baker they were dim and far away.

In the chair across from the sheriff, John McPherson moved restlessly. It was this restlessness, this constant drive within him that had made him the owner of the largest cattle ranch in all of Mesquite County.

"That's the way of it, Buck," McPherson said, a sour expression on his long face. He was a man who had grown old at forty. "When we elected you sheriff it was because we thought you would always feel the Law comes first."

"Haven't changed, have I?" Baker's tone was curt.

There was a ruthlessness about McPherson the sheriff had never liked. Buck Baker had won the office of sheriff of Mesquite County because the local citizens had cast the most votes for him. McPherson talked as though Baker held the office merely because the owner of the Double Diamond outfit wanted it that way.

"Up to now, yuh haven't," McPherson said in answer to Baker's question. "But I'm wondering if you will keep on puttin' the law first."

"Meaning if I don't arrest Roy Foster on yore say-so, yuh'll figger I'm not fit to be sheriff," said Baker. "We've had trouble around here in the last month or so. Ranchers have been held up by a lone bandit when they have been heading home with the payroll cash. Nobody knows who the robber is—folks say he is always masked."

"I claim the robber is Roy Foster," said McPherson impatiently. "And I insist you arrest him, Sheriff!"

"On what grounds?" Baker asked.

"On the evidence that Foster is guilty." John McPherson rose and strode to the door. "A good lawman should be able to find that evidence!"

He left the sheriff's office. A few minutes later Baker heard the sound of Mc-

It's a Tough Deal for the Law Till Blue Lobo Cuts In!

Pherson's horse as the rancher rode out of town.

The sheriff sighed. Three years ago he and Roy Foster had been top hands working for the Circle C outfit over south. They were both in their late twenties and had been pards. Then Baker had been asked to run for sheriff and Foster had established a little ranch of his own.

To John McPherson Roy Foster had been just another nester, and he had resented him. Now the owner of the Double Diamond had suddenly become very anxious for the sheriff to arrest Foster as the lone bandit.

SPURS jingled. Baker glanced up. A lean man loomed in the doorway of the office. He was dressed in range clothes, with a gun in the holster on his right hip. His appearance was salty.

"Evenin'," the stranger said. "I'm Lon Graham. Reckon you must be the sheriff."

"That's right." Baker nodded, wondering what Graham wanted. "Something I can do for you? Buck Baker is the name."

Graham moved into the office. "You might tell me where I can find a sidewinder who wears a blue neckerchief with four leaf clovers on it," he said. "That jasper held me up just outside of town a little while ago and took every cent I had."

The sheriff sighed again and stared unseeingly out of the window. The night was dark and there were no stars visible in the sky. The faint breeze that blew against Baker's face felt good.

"Where did this happen?" he asked, turning to Graham.

"About a mile out of town on the north road," Graham said. "I had me a little ranch down Utah, but sold out and headed up here to Wyoming. Was carrying the cash I got for the ranch with me—ten thousand dollars."

"Ten thousand dollars!" The sheriff eyed Lon Graham in amazement. "Kind of reckless in carrying that much money around, weren't you?"

"Didn't figger anybody would even know I had it on me," said Graham. "But I made a mistake. I'm ridin' along plumb peaceful when this Blue Lobo steps out from behind a rock and has me covered."

"So that's what the lone bandit calls himself," said Baker. "First time I knew that he had any special name."

"Blue Lobo is what he called himself," said Graham. "He made me get off my horse, hit me over the head and knocked me cold. Next thing I knew I was lying beside the road and my money was gone."

"There's a feller that's suspected of being this Blue Lobo," said Sheriff Baker. "Reckon I'll ride out to his ranch right now and have a little talk with him."

"If you haven't any objections, I'd like to ride out there with you," Graham said eagerly. "How about it, Sheriff?"

"All right with me," said Baker. "Wait out front while I saddle up."

Graham walked out into the street while the sheriff locked up the office. Then the lawman went out to the little corral behind the jail building to get his horse.

"Who is this hombre you suspect of being the Blue Lobo?" Graham asked a little later, as they rode out of town together.

"Feller named Foster," said Baker. "He owns a little spread about five miles out of town. There's some rocky country between Gunsight and the Bar F, but it is right good range land after you get there."

They continued on for some time before Lon Graham spoke again.

"What makes you suspect Roy Foster?" he asked.

"It's not exactly my idea," said the sheriff dryly. "A hombre named John McPherson suggested it."

Baker's mood had changed. He no longer felt as weary as he had earlier in the evening. He was hoping Roy Foster would be able to clear himself.

They reached the Bar F about nine o'clock. Lights were burning in the windows of the little one-story ranchhouse. The sheriff and Graham rode up to the front door. Roy Foster must have heard the hoofbeats of their horses, for he came to the door and stood peering out into night.

"Evenin', Roy," the sheriff called. "It's me—Buck Baker and a hombre I brought along with me."

"Howdy, Buck," said Foster. "Light and rest yore saddles."

Graham and the sheriff dismounted, leaving their horses ground-hitched. They went into the house. In the living room Foster turned to them, obviously delighted at having company.

"Glad to know you, Graham," Foster said after the sheriff made the introductions. "Believe I have a bottle and some glasses around here somewhere. Just a moment till I get it."

"You needn't bother, Roy," said the sheriff in a tired voice. "This visit is official."

FOSTER looked puzzled. "Official? What do you mean, Buck?"

"There's been talk of you being the lone bandit," Baker said. "I've got to take you in for questioning, Roy."

"I see." Abruptly all the friendliness vanished from Roy Foster's face. "So that's the way of it."

"That's the way of it," Baker answered. "Reckon yuh better give me yore gun, Roy."

Silently Foster handed his gun to the sheriff, butt first. Neither man had noticed that Graham had stepped to an open door into Foster's bedroom, next to the living room.

"You have no evidence against me," Foster was saying. "Nothing to prove I might be the lone bandit."

"Don't be so sure of that, Foster!" Graham had reappeared. Now he held a roll of money in his hand. "I found this in that other room. I'm bettin' part of this cash is the same money the Blue Lobo got from me tonight."

"Where did you find that?" asked the sheriff, staring at the bills.

"Stuffed in an old boot under Foster's bed," Graham said.

Graham started to shove the money into a pocket of his levis, but the sheriff held out his hand and Graham handed it over.

"Saddle up a horse, Roy," Baker said. "We're headin' back to town."

They went out to the corral where Foster roped and saddled a horse. Baker and Graham watched him. If any of Foster's men were around they were not paying any attention to what was going on. The sheriff had left Foster's gun on a table back in the house.

"All right," said Baker when the three men were in their saddles. "Let's ride."

He hated the silence upon Foster's part —he wanted Foster to clear himself at once, knowing the bitterness that must be in the heart of his former pard. But there were things a lawman had to do.

The ranch was left behind them and they were riding through the rocky stretch between the Bar F and the town. Finally Graham slowed his horse until he lagged behind the other two men.

"What's the matter?" asked Baker as he glanced back.

"My horse has a stone wedged in his hoof," said Graham. "I better pry it out." He halted his mount. "Ride on. I'll catch up with you."

Graham dismounted. As the rancher and the sheriff rode close together Foster suddenly reached out. He caught Baker around the waist with one arm, while his other hand snatched the gun out of the sheriff's holster.

"Quit it, you fool!" roared Baker.

"I'll get him, Sheriff!" Graham yelled from behind them.

His gun roared and Foster slid out of the saddle, to sprawl motionless on the ground, the sheriff's gun still clutched in his hand. His horse moved away and then halted, reins dragging.

"You didn't need to kill him," Baker said, wheeling his horse to face Graham.

"Yes, I did," said Graham, his voice hard and the gun in his hand covering the sheriff. "It is better that way."

"What do you mean?" Baker glared at the stranger.

"You found that Foster was the Blue Lobo," said Graham. "When you tried to bring him into town the two of you got into a gunfight and you were both killed."

"Both killed?" said Baker. In reply Graham aimed his gun at Baker's heart. "So that's it. You're the Blue Lobo. Nobody held you up and robbed you tonight—that was just a bluff. You had the money with you all the time and you pretended to find it at Foster's place."

"You're guessin' close," said Graham grimly. "With you and Foster both dead folks will stop lookin' for the lone bandit. But we're wastin' time talkin'. This is yore finish, Sheriff."

FROM the ground the gun in Roy Foster's hand roared. Graham uttered a howl of pain and rage as a bullet shattered his wrist. His gun went flying out of his fingers.

Foster jumped to his feet.

"Thanks, Roy," said Baker. "Figgered

you died right easy for such a tough hombre."

"Knew there was something wrong when you were so willin' to accept Graham's story about findin' the money back at the ranch," said Foster. "And when he told us that stuff about his horse pickin' up a stone, I was dead shore he meant to get tricky. His horse hadn't even been limpin'."

"So you were smart enough to start strugglin' with me, and grab my gun," said Baker. "I thought you had gone plumb loco. Are you hurt bad, Roy?"

"Naw, his bullet just creased my shoulder," said Foster. "But I knew I had better play dead, pronto."

They stared at Graham, who had dropped down on a rock. He sat there glaring at them and cursing and holding his wounded hand.

"I started suspecting him when he told me about being held up and robbed by the lone bandit," Baker said. "First he said the bandit wore a blue mask with four-leaf clovers on it, and seeing that on a dark night like this was a good trick. Then he knew the bandit called himself the Blue Lobo, and far as I know, only the robber knew that. I just called you Foster when we started out to your ranch, but when he spoke of you he knew your first name."

An hour later three men rode into the little cowtown and halted their horses in front of the sheriff's office. One of them had his right hand crudely bandaged, the other man wore an empty holster, and they both appeared to be the sheriff's prisoners.

John McPherson had returned to town and he hurried down the street as he spied the three riders.

"So you got him, Sheriff," McPherson said. "You brought in the lone bandit. I told you it was Foster."

"You guessed wrong," said Baker curtly. He nodded at Graham. "This hombre is the lone bandit. He's admitted it—and he's even turnin' the money he got from the holdups over to me."

"Looks like I have been a fool," said McPherson. "I was so sure it was Foster—just because I always was one to cling to my own ideas." He looked at Foster and the smile on his face was surprisingly pleasant. "And if you feel like giving me a good kick in the pants, go right ahead, Roy."

"No, thanks, John," said Foster. He also was grinning. "A boot nearly got me in enough trouble tonight. I'll keep my feet on the ground."

Sheriff Baker was smiling, too, as he led his prisoner back to the jail building. In his estimation it had been a right busy evening.

RANGER JIM HATFIELD AT HIS BATTLING BEST IN

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Maltby seized the Indian by the scalp-lock

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MALTBY, the AVENGER

THE rocky ground was still wet with blood; the bodies of the scalped settlers were still warm where the red raiders had dumped them in the hill country farmyard. The company of Rangers reined their ponies in a little circle around the corpses of the Burnet County homesteader, his wife, and their four young children. Reverently, they doffed their big Stetsons and gazed silently at the slain.

Every man there knew that the family of Wafford Johnson might have been his family, that feud-ripped year of 1863. Texan was fighting Texan as the hill country divided between those who rode for Jeff Davis and those who rode for Abe Lincoln. But the Kiowas and Comanches had united to plunder Texas when Texans had split up. Against the red tide hurling itself from the Red Rover and Indian Territory

stood only small companies of unpaid volunteer Rangers like this one.

Huge Footprint

A harsh voice broke the silence. "If we hadn't been out huntin' white men, this mornin', we'd have got here in time to stop this. Every man denned up in them caves 'cause he won't wear gray is one good man less to kill Injuns."

Some of the Rangers shifted uneasily in their saddles when they heard that. But the huge man who had spoken sprang from his saddle and walked toward the body of Wafford Johnson. He noticed that the pistol had been ripped from Johnson's belt as the scalp had been ripped from his head. Carefully, he inspected the ground around the bodies of the murdered settlers. He stopped short when he found what he had been looking for—the print of a big bare foot in the ground, now hard and sun-baked.

He turned and faced his men. "It's Chief Big Foot again," he growled. "This makes the thirteenth time he's raided Burnet County in twelve months. I reckon he ain't bettin' on Jeff Davis or Abe Lincoln in this man's war. But he's sure bettin' on it bein' a good thing for Big Foot.

"I ain't braggin' when I say he can put a bet on Jeff Maltby. If I don't slit his buzzard craw some day, I'll go back to whackin' bulls on Red River.

"All right, boys, we'll try to head him off at San Saba Crossin' where he generally makes his gitaway."

Rangers Begin Chase

Two Rangers were left behind to bury the dead. Fifteen men with the best horses followed Maltby as a main corps, riding like lightning toward San Saba Crossing, ninety miles away. Fifteen with the slowest horses trailed behind to guard against flank attacks from one of the many Kiowa-Comanche war parties hiding in the thickets. And on that long ride across mountains and creek bottoms, Jeff Maltby was thinking of what the Confederate commander in Austin, had told him a few months before:

"We're taking you out of the regular army, Jeff, to do a bigger job for Texas. We're sending you home to Burnet County to raise a company of Rangers. Your orders are to arrest all deserters and bushwhackers, and to kill every blasted Indian who puts his foot in the county."

Maltby Remembers Lincoln

Jeff Maltby had kept to himself what he thought of the deserters and bushwhackers—the Union men who'd swapped steers and shoats with him before Texas shot its way out of the Union as it had shot its way into it. He'd been born near Springfield, Illinois, where he'd often heard a lanky lawyer named Lincoln tell taller tales than he'd ever heard in Texas. That was before his first trip to Texas as a bullwhacker. But his tongue had been fast, like his pistol, on the subject of Injuns.

"Colonel," he'd answered. "That foot order sure pleases me. For every light moon this year of 'sixty-three, our county has been raided by Injuns. And one of the skunks has a remarkably big foot."

And now as he sped across the hills, he realized that he had to back up tongue talk with trigger talk. Or else, every man fighting on either side would come home to find his family massacred. And family growing was hard-growing out here in the hills—harder than corn-growing on the rocks of Burnet County.

They were halfway to San Saba Crossing when they heard the heavy gallop of hooves behind them. "About face, men!" Maltby called. "Let's see who's doin' all this hard trailin'."

Five minutes later, a Ranger of the rear guard party wheeled up his spent horse and faced his chief. "We just come across the fresh tracks of Big Foot, Cap'n Jeff," he reported. "Which means you're ahead of 'em and can beat 'em to San Saba Crossin'."

Rear Is Guarded

"Borrow a fresh horse from the first ranchhouse," Maltby ordered the Ranger. "Ride back and tell the boys to keep us covered till they join us at the Crossin'." He took out his Colt and rammed in two fresh cartridges. "This time the game's meetin' us," he called to the men riding with him. And it'll be better shootin' than wild turkey."

Night had come and gone but the sun

was still low in the sky when Maltby with his main guard pulled up at the bank of San Saba Crossing.

They had ridden ninety miles across trackless jungles of mesquite and catclaw in twenty-six hours flat. They were tired, and Maltby suddenly realized that he had only slept three hours in three nights. But no man wanted to rest, and every man had his gun primed for the kill.

Maltby stationed two men to stand watch on a high mountain overlooking the Crossing. He had the horses tied behind a thicket that concealed them so that they could be mounted at the first sign of Indians.

All day long, the Rangers waited for the game to show up. Once a twig snapped, and every man was on his feet with six-shooter cocked. Then from the brush walked a scared, nervous possum which dashed into a tree as the tense, trigger-minded Texans looked sheepishly at each other.

Orders Men to Eat

Jerked beef and beans were cooked up. But the Rangers ate little and said little until Maltby roared:

"Yuh can't fight Injuns on empty guns or empty stomachs. Now, fall to and git the kinks out of your middles or your fingers'll be all kinked up on the trigger."

At sundown, the spies sighted a lone rider galloping through the pass. When he drew nearer, they saw he was a white man. Into the camp rode a settler whom Maltby recognized as Reuben Senterfitt.

Senterfitt swung from his sweat-lathered horse and faced the Captain.

"Jeff," he said, "I knew you was here and I've rode hard to be in at the killin'. But Big Foot has out-guessed yuh. He left the trail south of here and went that way."

Senterfitt pointed his finger southwest. Then his eyes bulged as he wheeled around and faced Maltby.

"Look, Jeff!" he shouted. "There go the rascals now—on top of that bald hill over yonder."

Maltby looked. Clearly visible in the setting sun were the war bonnets of the Indians on that hill a mile across San Saba Crossing.

"Saddles, men!" he called. The Rangers sprang on their horses, forded the Crossing, and headed their dripping cayuses toward the bald hill.

Rangers Sight Indians

Not a hoof slipped during that steep climb up the mountain. Not a cayuse balked as the prod of Ranger boots sped them up the winding trail to the top. When the Rangers reached the summit, they saw the Indians at the base of the mountain, a half mile below.

Then the Red raiders sighted the Texans. Whooping and yelling, they began riding like mad, driving forty stolen horses before them. Maltby leaned forward and slapped his pony's neck with his sombrero. The horse plunged down the mountain. And behind it thundered the cayuses. In a minute, the Rangers had reached the bottom and were in hot pursuit of the savages.

Maltby's eyes saw a towering warrior, resplendent in the war dress of a Kiowa chief, who rode at the head of the band.

"Big Foot!" he whispered to himself. And his hand caressed his Colt when he said it.

For a full mile they rode after the savages. The horse of one Indian stumbled. Maltby spurred his pony and overtook the Kiowa who was kicking the lamed horse desperately. The Kiowa drew a carbine, and the bullet whistled over Maltby's head. Maltby leaned forward from his horse, and grabbed the brave by the scalp-lock. He whipped out his bowie knife and thrust it deep in the Kiowa's throat. The Indian slid from the horse, twitched for a minute on the rocky ground, and died.

Kills More Redmen

Three more Indians died from three shots of Jeff Maltby's Colt. A dozen more were lying on the ground from the raking fire of the Rangers. Twice, Maltby fired at the Kiowa chief. Twice, Big Foot turned back to thumb his nose at the white chief. Then, Maltby's horse came to a dead stop, puffing and heaving. When he looked around, the Captain saw that the same thing was happening to the ponies of the other Rangers. Texas horses were brave like Texas men. But now the horses were spent from too much riding and too little rest. And the Indians were lengthening

the distance between themselves and the Texans.

"We've got to let 'em rest a little," Maltby said. "Or else they'll cave in and we'll be fightin' them red devils on foot." After a quarter of an hour, the Texans spurred their ponies and took up the chase. But when they came in sight of the Indians, the braves were disappearing into a canyon.

Then Maltby halted his men. "No use of follerin' 'em in there," he said quietly. "They could pick us off one by one. We'll wait till mornin' and go after 'em."

Pick Up Trail Again

The Rangers camped by the canyon. The rear guard came up to reinforce them. When morning came, they picked up the trail and followed it for two days. But, once again, Big Foot had given the slip to the Texas Rangers. Once again, Jeff Maltby's face was hard and set. And, once again, he was saying:

"A snake that keeps on bitin' people spits around a lot of poison before its head gits bashed in. And some day Big Foot is goin' to git bashed if I have to foller him from here to Red River."

He carved four notches in his gun for Big Foot's braves whom he had killed. He headed back to Burnet County for fresh mounts to take up the chase. There he found the assignment that he'd been expecting and not wanting.

That assignment was to round up the Union guerillas in the hills of adjoining Travis County and to round up, in particular, their leader, ex-Ranger Dick Preece.

Maltby remembered well Richard Lincoln Preece, born kinfolks to Abe Lincoln in the same Kentucky hills where both Preeces and Lincolns had been born. Young Dick had been one of the crack shots of the Texas Rangers and in the fierce Indian fights along the Concho River had been cited many times for bravery. But when Texas hitched up with Jeff Davis, he'd stuck by his kinsman who sat in the White House.

Organizes Union Fighters

"To blazes with the Confederacy," he'd spoken for the Preeces and the other mountain clans allied with them. "We was born under the Stars and Stripes. We'll die under the Stars and Stripes."

Then he'd organized the clans into that hard-shooting guerilla outfit calling itself the Texas Mountain Eagles. The Mountain Eagles had slaughtered every Confederate force sent out from Austin, the capital ten miles away, to claim the hills for Jeff Davis. They'd caught Confederate conscription officers, tried them in creek-bottom court martials, and hanged them for "high treason to the government of the United States." Now they were threatening to march across a couple of hollows, seize Austin, and string up every official of the Confederate state government. That was to be revenge for the hanging of two of their men.

Maltby rode at the head of fifty men when he crossed the Colorado River into Travis County. He kept a wary eye on three brothers in his company. He'd have never given them the Ranger oath in ordinary times because men with hard names weren't wanted in the Rangers. But you had to take almost anybody with practically all of the good men off in the army.

Captures Deserters

Maltby's command captured two or three deserters and turned them over to Confederate authorities in Austin. It had one or two skirmishes with scattered patrols of the Mountain Eagles. But weeks passed without a single Ranger seeing hide or hair of his ex-comrade, Dick Preece.

"Dick's as smart as a fox," Maltby remarked to Lieutenant John Owens. "Take them three over there—pointing to the brothers—and keep watch on his daddy's house. They ain't fit to be fighting men and I'm bootin' 'em out of my company as soon as this war is over."

Lieutenant Owens came down with bloody flux and had to go home to Burnet County for a rest. And that left the three brothers to guard the Preece cabin. On a trip of inspection, one day, Maltby reined up outside the house. And his face was tighter than that day when he'd missed Big Foot as he took in the scene.

Under a big chinaberry tree in the front yard, Dick's twelve-year-old brother, Frank, stood with a rope around his neck. The end of the rope was in the hands of

one of the brothers. The other two men covered with guns Frank's hysterical mother and sisters.

Maltby sprang from his horse and hurtled across the low picket fence. The brothers turned red as beets when their captain faced with them. Then they started shaking in their boots as a Ranger commander pulled a gun on his own men for the first time in the history of the Rangers.

"Quick!" Maltby thundered. "Take that rope off that kid or I'll drop you in your blasted tracks where you stand."

"Y-yes, sir," stuttered the one who held the rope end. "We was just scarin' the kid to make him tell where Dick's hid out."

"That ain't the way the Texas Rangers find out things! Report back to camp and git your pay. And if you git bushwhacked by Dick Preece's men before you git out of these hills, I'll be mighty glad of it."

He turned and took off his sombrero in a sweeping bow to Preece's mother.

"I'm plumb sorry and plumb ashamed, ma'am," he said. "And nobody's goin' to watch yore house no more."

He rode away, the three brothers riding with the looks of sheep-killing dogs before him.

For the next two years, Maltby and his Rangers patrolled the hills against Indians and bushwhackers. He added more notches to his gun, and more acres to his rocky hill country ranch. He stopped wearing the medals the Confederate Government sent him because "two Colts and a carbine's enough iron weight for any man to pack around."

Returns to Farming

The Civil War ended; the Confederacy collapsed. The volunteer Rangers were mustered out. For ten years, Jeff Maltby plowed corn and branded calves.

Then Big Foot began raiding Texas again. And Governor Richard Coke in Austin sent for the man who'd never forgotten his promise to kill Big Foot.

Jeff Maltby was remembering the staring, dead eyes of his neighbors, the Johnsons, that morning in 1876, when he rode out as captain of Company E of the newly-organized Ranger corps, the Frontier Battalion. He had always believed that the time would come when he could back up tongue talk with trigger talk.

That time was here.

The Kiowa chief had left a clear trail of thieving and murder in the West Texas hills, two hundred long miles from Burnet County. Smoking cabins and scalped settlers marked the path of his depredations. Whenever he finished a raiding spree in Texas, he marched back to his reservation in Indian Territory where sentimental missionaries protected him.

Follows Chief's Trail

Maltby struck his trail on the Salt Fork of the Brazos in Coleman County. He followed that trail forty miles across mesquite and cactus toward Valley Creek in Runnels County.

Proudly, he looked at his boys of Company E warming up to that warm trail left by Big Foot. Brave men who'd ridden for Abe Lincoln in the Mountain Eagles were teamed up with brave men who'd ridden for Jeff Davis in the army of the Confederacy. Texas was one again—one against the redskin savages who'd come close to wiping Texas off the map when it had been divided.

His jaws became hard and tight when he saw what one Ranger was remembering. That Ranger was somber Bill Williams whose family had been wiped out by Big Foot's gang of scalpers in one of the Burnet County raids. And now Bill Williams lived only for vengeance.

The stars were fading from the Texas skies that dawn when they spotted the Indians camped in an elm grove on Valley Creek. Squaws were driving stolen horses to the creek for water. Breakfast fires were being lit. Maltby guessed that the Indians were getting an early start on the long ride back to Indian Territory.

"But these snakes'll never git back to their den," he whispered to Bill Williams. And there was the slight flicker of a hard smile on the tight mouth of the Burnet County settler who'd dropped the plow for the pistol when he'd buried his family.

The horses of the Rangers made hardly a sound on the soft sand bank of Valley Creek. Maltby ordered the force to spread out when it was within a hundred yards of the camp: one group to charge from the left and another from the right.

The battle cry of the Texas Rangers sounded above the quietness of that early

Texas morning. The flying hoofs of Ranger cayuses trampled the campfires and the grub cooking over them. Ranger carbines began braining savage skulls. The first blood was drawn by Corporal Henry Sackett. He singled out a Comanche brave whose face was daubed blood red with war paint. Six shots rang out from Sackett's Colt and every shot found its mark. The Indian leaped high into the air, came down with a low whimper, and crawled off, a dying thing, into a thicket.

Then Jeff Maltby saw the man for whom he had been gunning thirteen long years.

Indian Is Giant

A towering chieftain, whose broad shoulders had the spread of eagle wings, was trying to mount a terrified stallion stolen from a Coleman County ranch. In one hand, Big Foot carried a shiny Spencer rifle given him by the sentimental missionaries for "hunting." Two shots roared from Maltby's carbine. The Kiowa dodged, and the bullets drove straight to the heart of the scared horse. It fell dead in the sand as other Indians were mounting scrubby cayuses in a hopeless effort to escape the hail of Ranger rifle shot.

Big Foot turned and aimed his Spencer at Maltby. A shot from the Ranger's carbine knocked the fine gun out of the chieftain's hand, and it fell with a thud on the carcass of the dead horse. Then the Kiowa drew a pistol from his belt. His eyes were gloating with the lust of blood when he advanced toward the Ranger.

"The game's coming to meet me—and here's where I pot it," Jeff Maltby was thinking out loud. He waited till the savage was in twenty paces. Then he reined his pony dead still. And his carbine talked for him, talked for all the settlers murdered by this Kiowa killer.

The shot that Maltby fired sang like a Ranger hymn of hate. It knocked the hammer off Big Foot's gun. The flying piece drove into his cheek, then tore through his jugular vein. The blood spurted from the savage throat like water from a fountain. When the chief fell, it stained the sand bank a dark red. And standing over his enemy, Jeff Maltby was remembering how he had once stood over the dead bodies of Wafford Johnson and his family.

It had taken thirteen years. But he had kept the promise of vengeance made that other morning in Burnet County to a man who could not hear the promise.

That night, the Rangers camped on Valley Creek. They dug a big trench and buried in the common grave the dead Indians. Next morning at dawn, they were awakened by cries and groans out in the thicket. A detachment of Rangers cautiously went to investigate. They came back with the Comanche that had been shot by Henry Sackett.

The Indian's eyes were already glazed with the look of a warrior traveling to the Happy Hunting Grounds. But they lit up with a faint spark when they rested on Bill Williams. And the recognition was mutual. Bill Williams saw again the face of the Comanche chief, Jape, leader of the war party which had wiped out his family.

The Texan cocked his gun and advanced toward the dying Comanche. Jeff Maltby grabbed him by the shoulder.

"The coyote'll be dead in a minute, anyhow, Bill," he said. "Let's pump him for what we can before he goes out."

The Comanche's Confession

The Indian made a clean breast of a dozen massacres, including the slaying of the Williams family. Jeff Maltby took notes as he talked. And those notes would be forwarded to Indian Affairs Office in Washington as clinching proof that the savages who left the reservation had something else in mind besides "hunting."

The Comanche's eyes closed in a middle of a sentence. Jeff Maltby looked at him and saw that he was dead. Then Bill Williams drew out his bowie knife and stepped forward. He ripped the Indian's scalp from his head and coolly placed it in his belt.

Maltby retired from the Rangers immediately after the extermination of Big Foot's killer band. He bought a farm in Callahan County, not far from the place where he had killed the Kiowa war chief.

"That's so I can blast the Injun's ghost if it ever starts walkin'," he told Governor Richard Coke.

He died in 1908 at the age of seventy-nine. And before he died, his name was legend. He was one of the best—and one of the bravest.

A rider of the owlhoot puts up a valiant battle against suspicion and treachery!

Bob Logan twisted and swayed

POWDERSMOKE INSURANCE

OUTLAWED, with a sizable cash reward offered for his dead-or-alive apprehension, "Long Sam" Littlejohn had learned the hard way, to be cautious about approaching other humans too boldly. He thought the smartest thing he could do would be to let the man and woman down there in the canyon below him settle their squabbling. Yet Long Sam kept squatting there on his heels. He was a gaunt, unusually tall man, dressed in jetty black from boots to flat-crowned Stetson.

Even the shell-studded belts slanted

A Long Sam Littlejohn Story by **LEE BOND**

about his middle were black, supporting a pair of hand-tooled black holsters that bulged with black-butted six-shooters. The outlaw was keeping his tall body very still, for the Texas sun was not quite down, and those people in the canyon below him might see him there on the rim, in case they looked up.

But the couple down there did not look up. The man, a short, thick-set, tough looking fellow, was grinning at the slender, black-haired young woman in a way that made Long Sam Littlejohn shake his yellow-thatched head disapprovingly. The girl was evidently afraid of the red-faced, leering man, for she kept sidling away from him, each time he tried to touch her.

Long Sam looked at the slope that pitched down before him. It was heavily grown with fuzzy young pine, and he knew that he could get down there without running much of a risk. Sleeper, his big, ugly roan horse, was hidden back in the thick timber a hundred yards away. The gaunt outlaw was on the point of easing away from the rim and riding on about his own business when the girl, jumping away from the lunging man, tripped and fell.

"Got yuh now, Sally!" the man yelled loudly.

Long Sam slid into the fuzzy young pines and went noiselessly down the slope. The girl did not cry out, but the way the fellow kept cussing and blustering, Long Sam was not surprised when he reached the valley floor, to see the fellow backing away from the white-faced girl, sleeving bloody scratches along his pudgy cheeks.

Long Sam halted in the edge of the young pines, grinning at the way the black-haired girl was standing up to that tough looking hombre.

"You little hellcat, I ought to box yore ears for you!" the man was saying angrily. "What if I told Tuck that you followed me out there from the Boxed Eight?"

"Go ahead, Bob Logan, and tell Tuck that I followed you out here!" the girl said sharply. "Tuck Ollard is my own second cousin, but he wants to marry me. That's the only way he can ever gain full control of the Boxed Eight ranch I helped him finance. Tell Tuck that I followed you because you pulled the shoes off four of our best saddle horses and led them out here to this canyon."

"Quit actin' so darned high-and-mighty, Sally!" Bob Logan snapped. "Tuck would take a quirt to you if he knowed you follered me out here."

"I'd take a quirting from Tuck before I'd let you make love to me, Bob!" the girl said bluntly.

"Aw, rats!" Bob Logan sneered. "You make it sound like I was tryin' to act big with you Sally. But I ain't. I been crazy about you, ever since Tuck fetched me and Dick Hayden and Whit Champion down to this Texas thicket country to he'p him run this Boxed Eight ranch. All yuh've got to do to keep me from tellin' Tuck that you spied on me today is just quit actin' like I ain't fit for you to be seen with."

"And all I have to do to be rid of your stupid attentions is tell Tuck why I put those scratches on your face," the girl retorted.

BOB LOGAN cursed thickly and Long Sam could see plainly that the pudgy, thick-lipped gent was suddenly scared.

"What will it be tonight, Bob, the express office?" The girl's voice was low and even, yet her words made Bob Logan jump.

"What in blazes are yuh talkin' about?" he growled, and suddenly his blocky hands were touching the butts of twin guns that pronged out from his thighs in tied-down holsters.

The girl was frightened. Long Sam suddenly saw the terror in the girl's big, dark eyes, and in the pallor that touched her mouth, sun-tinted cheeks. But she stood her ground.

"I'm not the fool Tuck Ollard seems to consider me, Bob!" she said gravely. "I know that you and Tuck and Dick Hayden and Whit Champion have been sneaking Boxed Eight cattle off the range and selling them to shady buyers. I also know that the four of you are part of the mysterious bandits who have held up the stage three times within the past six months! Tuck and Dick Hayden and Whit Champion and Long Sam Littlejohn are in Los Flores, right now, robbing the bank or the express office, or

some other place where money might be kept."

Long Sam groaned under his breath, bony hands dropping down to gun-butts. The plucky girl had gone too far. Bob Logan ripped both guns out of holsters and pointed their yawning muzzles squarely at the girl.

"Sally, I hate to do it, but I've got to hold yuh until Tuck says what's to be done with you!" Logan croaked.

"So Tuck and those other renegades are in Los Flores, intending to pull another robbery!" she said angrily. "They'll race back here, then all four of them will mount those unshod horses and separate. The horse you rode down here was a blotched brand, I noticed. Tuck, Dick, Littlejohn and Whit will be riding blotch-branded mounts, too. When the horses are found, no one can say where they came from. Isn't that it, Bob?"

"I don't know how much of yore talk is just guessin', but that'll come out later," Bob Logan growled. "Where's yore horse at?"

"You don't think I'd be fool enough to come out here alone, do you?" the girl countered desperately.

Bob Logan waved the muzzles of his guns, motioning up-canyon. The girl glanced desperately about, but saw no escape from her predicament.

"Break and run again, like yuh done when I sighted yuh snoopin' around them unshod hosses, and I'll wing yuh with a bullet!" he told her angrily. "The kind of talk you've been makin' could put a noose around your neck, Sally. You're always hanging around old Sheriff Herb Wayne and his wife when you're in town, so mebbe you've already blabbed."

"Then you intend to kill me!" Sally Ollard said in a choked voice.

"I'll handle him from here on, Sally!" Long Sam called sharply. "Guess he thought you were bluffin' about havin' help, eh?"

Had he looked at the girl's face, Bob Logan would have known that her surprise was as great as his own. But Bob Logan whirled from the girl. He hunched down and began thumb-fanning the hammers of his guns faster and faster, and suddenly Long Sam was staggering backwards, a numbed sensation along the side of his face where a bullet had raked the skin.

Another slug knocked Long Sam's hat off, and a third ripped across his right side with such force that he was thrown backward. Then Long Sam was stepping out of the brush, a spitting six-shooter in each hand. Bob Logan's stocky body twisted, jerked and swayed, then he was down on his back, his empty hands twitching. Long Sam waited there on wide-planted feet, humming softly as the girl ran up to him, pale and shaken.

"Thank heavens!" she said simply. "Whoever you are, you saved—"

She broke off, and Long Sam looked at her soberly. She wore waist-length Levi's tucked into bench made boots, a brown shirt that had been built for a boy, and a gray Stetson that was new and bright. She began backing slowly away from the gaunt outlaw, full-lipped mouth gaping. Long Sam trying to act unconcerned, began reloading the spent chambers in his guns.

"Yeah, I know!" he said. "You've recognized me from the pictures on the 'wanted' posters that cussed Joe Fry keeps nailin' up to anything that'll hold still long enough."

The girl stopped backing away, an almost guilty look coming into her eyes. Long Sam holstered his reloaded guns, went into the thicket for his hat, then came out, looking sharply at the girl as he put the hat on.

"You're hurt!" she cried suddenly. "Mr. Littlejohn, there's blood all over the side of your shirt, and some on your face, too. And if you hadn't come along that —that man would have murdered me!"

"Get hold of yoreself!" Long Sam commented earnestly. "These scratches on my hide don't matter. The thing for you and me to do is get to heck-and-gone out of here. I spotted a big red horse tied out on top of the ridge, yonder, and left my own roan up there. Let's get to the mounts and ramble."

"But the way that side of yours is bleeding—" Sally began, but broke off when the pound of hoofs drummed through the gathering dusk.

QUICKLY Long Sam reached out, grabbed the girl's hand, and almost yanked her into the shelter of brush

along the base of the slope. He kept hold of her hand and went up through the fuzzy young pines, the pain in his wounded side beginning to interfere with his breathing. But he kept going up the slope at a stiff clip.

Reaching the crest, Long Sam broke into a trot while Sally Ollard gripped his hand, gamely trying to keep up with him. Behind them were sounds of horses milling and men shouting. Long Sam kept trotting rapidly until he saw the girl's mount where he had found it earlier, tied to a sapling.

"Get in the saddle, but wait for me!" he said sharply. "Don't make any kind of fuss, or we'll be in trouble."

"That's Tuck Ollard and Dick Hayden and Whit Champion, down there!" Sally gasped. "I know their voices. They were close enough, evidently to have heard all that shooting. Tuck's a wizard at reading sign and will find our tracks."

Long Sam nodded, whirled into a thick stand of pines, and forced himself to run. He got to his big roan and was untying the reins when he heard horsemen coming up out of the canyon. He flung into the hand-tooled black saddle on Sleeper's back and spurred back towards the spot where he had left the girl, thankful for the rapidly thickening shadows of dusk. Sally had heard the riders coming up out of the canyon and was already in thick timber, walking her horse towards Long Sam.

"Good girl!" he approved as they met. "We'll swing deeper into this timber and keep goin' slow so yore cousin and his pals won't hear us. Be dark in another few minutes, and that'll stop Tuck Ollard from trailin' us."

"We'll have to see about that wound of yours before long," Sally said uneasily. "You're white as a ghost, Mr. Littlejohn."

"I'm Sam to my friends, little lady," the gaunt outlaw chuckled. "And stop worryin' about me."

"Where are we going?" Sally wanted to know, mounting her horse.

"You're goin' home, and you'd better make it fast," the outlaw told her. "I'll see about this wound of mine, then poke on into Los Flores. I want to see sheriff Herb Wayne."

"Are you out of your mind?" the girl gasped as they rode stirrup to stirrup. "Sheriff Wayne knows you're one of the four bandits who have been robbing the stages recently."

"Oh, he knows I'm one of the bandits, does he?" Long Sam asked grimly.

"Of course he does!" the girl said sharply. "The drivers and shotgun guards on the stages have identified you each time because of your height and the black clothes you always wear. Joe Fry, a deputy U. S. marshal from Austin, has been around Los Flores for three weeks now, hunting you. The descriptions the shotgun guards and stage drivers have given of the bandit leader, fit you precisely, Sam."

"So I heard," the gaunt outlaw said angrily. "I was a hundred miles south of here at Firefly, Sally, when I first got word that I was bein' accused of leadin' these bandits up here."

"You haven't been with the bandits who have robbed the stages here?" Sally asked slowly.

"Give a man a bad name, and everybody starts kickin' him!" Long Sam growled bitterly. "Of course I haven't been here helpin' rob stages. That sawed-off, derby-wearin', cigar-chewin' Joe Fry accuses me of every dirty crime committed in Texas. With him around, I'm not surprised that yore sheriff thinks I'm one of the local owlhooters."

"But why would Mr. Fry accuse you of crimes you did not commit?" the girl asked soberly.

"It's a matter of pride with Joe," Long Sam stated simply, reining his horse. "He's an ace man-hunter — shrewd, nervy, and deadly when he has to be. Joe's goshawful proud of his rep, and I reckon he's got a right to be. I happen to be the only 'wanted' man Joe ever went after without nailin' and the blamed cuss considers that a blot on his precious record."

"Mr. Fry certainly does hate you," Sally said soberly. "But if you haven't been up here helping rob those stages, who is the tall, black-clad man the drivers and guards identified as you?"

"Findin' that out is what I hope to do," answered Long Sam. "I've been around here five days, lookin' this deal over. A Mexican I knew down the river is here, workin' on a local ranch, and has been a lot of help pointin' out people who are

considered pretty tough customers."

"You know who the bandits are?" the girl asked excitedly.

"Not unless you named them when you told Bob Logan that him and Dick Hayden and Whit Champion and Tuck Ollard are the bandits," Long Sam replied. "This Mexican friend of mine pointed those four out, and said they're rated about the toughest roosters in the country."

GRAVELY the girl spoke, while Sam listened attentively to every word:

"They're tough, brawling, overbearing and dangerous!" she said. "When my parents died, three years ago, and left me with two big Iowa farms, I was foolish enough to get in touch with Tuck Ollard, who talked me into selling the farms, promising to take me in as a full partner in what he described as a paying cattle ranch."

"I've been in sight of the Boxed Eight several times, these past five days," Long Sam said drily. "It's as pretty a ranch layout as I've ever seen. But unless I'm badly mistaken, the improvements are middlin' new."

"When I got out here the Boxed Eight was a clutter of sag-roofed shacks, corrals, trash piles, weeds and brush!" the girl said bitterly. "But cousin Tuck had already whizzed me into a fully executed partnership. I sank practically all the money I had, improving the ranch and restocking the range with cattle. I hired Nora Harper, a middle-aged Los Flores widow, and moved out to the ranch as soon as the place had been made livable."

"You think Tuck Ollard and his three pals are the bandits who have been hitting the stages, don't you?" Long Sam asked bluntly.

"I think it, but could never prove such a thing," the girl said wearily. "I was bluffing back there in the canyon, after Bob Logan caught me snooping. Each time there has been a stage robbery, Bob has pulled shoes off four of the Boxed Eight horses and led them off into the hills. I got up nerve enough to follow him, this time."

"Bandits switchin' to unshod hosses and scatterin' after a robbery would shore throw a posse off their trail," Long Sam said gravely. "But there's a fifth man in this deal, Sally."

"I've been wondering about that," the girl answered. "I know that Bob Logan has seen to the business of taking unshod horses into the hills just before each robbery was reported. I've thought that Logan may have planted the horses somewhere, then joined Tuck, Hayden and Champion to help hold up the stages."

"Only that theory won't hold up," Long Sam pointed out. "To begin with, big Tuck Ollard, wiry little Dick Hayden, that bean-pole of a Whit Champion, nor pudgy Bob Logan, would never be mistaken for me, regardless of how they dressed."

"And if there was a robbery in Los Flores tonight, and anyone claims Long Sam Littlejohn was leading the raid, I can certainly put a stop to such a tale!" the girl said stoutly.

"Just keep what yuh know to yoreself, Sally," Long Sam said after a pause.

"You're actually going through with this dangerous plan to see sheriff Herb Wayne, Sam?" the girl now asked.

"I am," the gaunt outlaw replied. "Herb Wayne is a tough old lawman, and hates bandits like poison. But he's fair and honest. I think I can convince him that I'm not behind his bandit troubles."

"But why run such a risk?" Sally countered quickly.

"Because the minute old Herb Wayne realizes that I'm not the leader of those bandits, Sally, he'll begin looking for another suspect," Long Sam pointed out. "And since the gent who has been mistaken for me, or mebbe deliberately posin' as me, is bound to be some local man, the sheriff may break this case wide open in a hurry."

"You'd actually help the law that hounds and hates you?" Sally asked quietly.

"Outside of Joe Fry, not many badge men make a point of pesterin' me too much," Long Sam chuckled drily.

"Sam Littlejohn, I don't believe you're a bandit at all!"

"Tell that to Joe Fry, then plug up yore ears before yuh hear his remarks!"

"I shall tell it to Joe Fry, and just the moment we get to town, too!"

"Whoa, now! You skitter on home, Sally."

"Piffle!" Sally insisted finally. "Sheriff

Wayne and his wife are my friends. If there was a robbery in town tonight, and people are saying Long Sam Littlejohn led the bandits, Sheriff Wayne will believe me when I tell him how impossible it was."

Long Sam argued, but to no avail. Sally Ollard was riding stirrup to stirrup with him when they broke out of the timber and went across a meadow towards Los Flores. And long before they were in the town, they knew that there had been trouble of some kind, for the street swarmed with shouting men, bobbing lanterns, and milling riders.

Saddled horses were banked all around the stout log building that was combination sheriff's office and jail, and Long Sam growled under his breath when he saw a stocky, thick-shouldered gent standing on the steps before the sheriff's office, waving blocky hands to silence a howling crowd.

"Sam, wait!" Sally Ollard said, clutching his arm.

"Uh-huh, I see Joe Fry, up yonder," the gaunt outlaw said. "I just want to get close enough to hear him."

Long Sam swung his horse away from the main drag, circling out through the shadows until he was at the west side of the jail building. Then he swung back towards the main street, halting in black shadows where he could see and hear Joe Fry plainly. Sally, evidently wanting to hear also, crowded her horse up beside Long Sam's roan.

JOE FRY had shoved a derby hat back on a mop of sand-colored hair, and was still waving the crowd to silence. Fry's button shoes were planted far apart, and his square-chinned, tough face looked hot and angry in the glow of lanterns in the hands of men before him. The deputy wore a neatly tailored gray suit, white shirt and brown tie. He had a cigar clamped in one corner of a mouth that looked as cold and hard as a sprung steel trap.

"He looks more like a successful merchant, than a professional man-hunter, doesn't he?" Sally asked tensely.

"That Joe Fry looks like anything but what he is but has been the undoin' of more than one badman," Long Sam said quietly.

"Sam, I don't believe you hate even Joe Fry!" Sally said sharply.

"Hate Joe?" the outlaw echoed. "Of course I don't. Joe's honest, and takes his job seriously. The blamed runt is a nuisance to me, shore. But if I hated Joe, I reckon I'd do somethin' besides run from the little shrimp."

"Quiet down, can't you?" Fry's voice lifted, sharp and authoritative now.

"Why all this stallin' around, Fry?" a man in the crowd yelled. "Them four bandits will be in Mexico with the express office loot while you stand around here gabblin'!"

"Four bandits!" Sally gasped. "The express office was robbed. Then there is a fifth member of that gang!"

"Shhh!" Long Sam warned, watching Joe Fry.

"Those bandits won't get too far!" the deputy marshal sang out. "I want a posse. But I want only six men. I'm not taking a young army of you out to blunder around and mess up sign. This is once Long Sam Littlejohn and his bunch won't get away!"

"Long Sam Littlejohn shot our sheriff down!" a man roared. "Now you want to blunder around and let Littlejohn and them other three the sheriff caught robbin' the express office get away!"

Sally tried to cry out in alarm over what she had heard, but Long Sam gripped her shoulder.

"Sheriff Wayne's thigh was deeply cut by the bullet Littlejohn fired at him," Fry was telling the crowd. "Your sheriff asked me to take over. I have full and complete authority, and this man-hunt is going to be run my way."

"And if we don't happen to like yore way of runnin' things Fry?" some fellow yelled.

"Then go to the devil!" Fry snapped. "I'm goin' after Long Sam Littlejohn and his bunch. I'll take six men with me, if six of you want to come along."

Growls and yells told of the crowd's displeasure, but Long Sam had no desire to hear more. He tugged Sally's arm, then turned Sleeper and walked the roan away.

"Where does Sheriff Wayne live, Sally?" he asked when they were well away from the street.

"This way!" the girl said shakily.

She rode at a brisk trot, and a few moments later was pulling up before a brightly lighted house near the north edge of town. Sally hopped out of saddle. Long Sam was lifting his right leg, ready to dismount, when he saw the shadowy figure of a man dart from a lighted window.

Without taking time to wonder why he did it, the gaunt outlaw dropped back into the saddle again and hooked Sleeper with gooseneck spurs. The big roan flung chucks of sod behind him as he barreled across the sheriff's yard. The man as the back corner of the house, running bent far over, when Long Sam saw him again.

The outlaw's spurs lifted Sleeper to a still faster pace, and suddenly the running man was streaking past a curbed well in the back yard, heading frantically for a woodpile. The fellow was unusually tall.

Long Sam realized that just as he quit the saddle to hit the running man in a flying tackle.

"Let go of me, you blasted fool!" a thin harsh voice rang in Long Sam's ears as he hit the ground, arms locked about the ribby man.

"Sam, what on earth!" Sally gasped, skidding to a halt beside the threshing tall man.

Long Sam did not answer right away. The skinny hombre had a gun in his right fist, and was squirming and kicking to bring the gun into play. Long Sam took a chance, jerked his right arm free, and hit the man full in the face. He got hold of a skinny wrist, twisted savagely, and heard the gun go down to the ground with a dull thump.

"What's the idea of jumpin' me, you blasted whelp?" the thin hard voice rasped.

"Bill Clanton!" Sally cried. "Mr. Clanton, why are you and Sam fighting?"

"Sam who?" Bill Clanton rasped.

"Jones!" Long Sam said quickly. "Sam Jones."

LONG SAM LITTLEJOHN got up, bringing Bill Clanton with him. The outlaw whistled softly, for the swaying man before him lacked only an inch or so of being as tall as he was.

"You seem to know this gent, Sally," Long Sam droned. "Who and what is he?"

"I'm Bill Clanton!" came the reply. "I own the stage and freight lines that operate between here and Wigwam, to the north. You'll pay for maulin' me around this way, Sam Jones!"

"Mebbe I'll pay, or mebbe I won't," Long Sam said drily. "First, let's find out why you were snoopin' around Sheriff Wayne's windows."

"The express office was held up tonight by Long Sam Littlejohn and his gang!" Bill Clanton gritted. "Old Herb Wayne blundered into the robbers while they were cleanin' out the safe, and Littlejohn shot him. I came up to see if the sheriff was makin' out all right."

"By snoopin' through a window?" Long Sam asked coldly.

"Mr. Clanton would not go into the sheriff's house, Sam," Sally said slowly. "He and Sheriff Wayne are bitter enemies. In fact—"

"Shut up, you little magpie!" Clanton cut in. "Get home, where you belong!"

"Bill Clanton!" Sally asked. "Why are you talking to me as if you had a right to order me around?"

"That's a good question, Sally," Long Sam remarked. "But don't wait for him to answer. Just go back along the wall of the house, there, and see if he didn't drop somethin'. I've got a hunch—"

Long Sam did not finish. He saw Bill Clanton's tall form crouch. Long Sam threw a quick left punch that staggered Clanton, then hit him with a right cross that stretched him senseless on the grass.

"Sam, what on earth got into Bill Clanton?" Sally asked nervously.

"I heard him drop somethin' when he seen that I was after him," Long Sam replied. "It sounded like a gun, the way it clattered. A big gun."

It was a gun—an eight gauge shotgun, both barrels loaded with fat blue shells that held double-ought buckshot. Long Sam found the weapon, opened the breech, and examined the cartridges by the light that came from a window in the sheriff's house. Sally was beside him, her eyes wide with surprise.

"Sam, Bill Clanton meant to murder the sheriff, didn't he?" she asked tensely.

"That Mexican friend of mine who's up here told me that Bill Clanton has been

doin' his double best to get Sheriff Herb Wayne kicked out of office," Long Sam said. "Yeah, Sally, I think Clanton meant to finish the sheriff he wounded earlier tonight."

"Sam," Sally insisted. "You think Bill Clanton is the fifth man of the bandits, don't you?"

"He's tall enough to be mistaken for me, in case he put on black clothes and masked his face," Long Sam pointed out.

"But that isn't enough to make you suspect him, surely!" the girl said quickly.

"No," Long Sam was obliged to admit. "But take this idea of Bill Clanton wantin' his own man in the sheriff's office. Add that to the fact the mysterious bandits I'm supposed to have been bossin' up here, always know when a hefty shipment of money is comin' over Bill Clanton's stage line, and you get another picture. Clanton is insured, so the insurance company has to stand the loss when his stages are robbed."

"How did you know about the insurance?" Sally asked. "I've been here quite a while, and have not heard anything like that."

"This Mexican friend of mine told me," Long Sam said. "Call him Pablo, for the sake of havin' a handle for him. Pablo works on a ranch up here, as I said. But he won't keep the job much longer, I reckon. You see, Sally, Pablo wrote to me at Firefly and told me I was bein' accused of ramroddin' these bandits up here. Pablo happens to be a crack investigator for the insurance company that insured Bill Clanton."

Long Sam heeled around, walked back to Bill Clanton, and picked the tall man up. He grinned ruefully when he saw the wicked knife lying there beside the senseless stage line owner.

"Lead the way, Sally," Long Sam said quietly. "We'll take this Clanton jigger inside. I saw a gray-haired lady and a pudgy, bald man peerin' out the window a while ago, so we've shore been heard out here."

"That was the sheriff's wife and Doctor Hume," Sally said. "I saw them."

Long Sam glanced at Sleeper, marking the location of his mount out of long practise. Then he was following Sally around the house and up the steps. The girl knocked at the door, then pulled the screen back and stepped inside, while she held the door for Long Sam. He started through, but whirled suddenly, gave his bony shoulder a heave that sent Bill Clanton sprawling into the middle of the room.

"What is it now, Sam?" Sally gasped.

HEAVILY booted feet hit the walk, and a hoarse voice lifted in anger, bawling Sally's name.

"Tuck!" she gasped, and shrank back.

"I heard men runnin' up the street towards this place," Long Sam said. "Get the doctor and Mrs. Wayne to help yuh guard Bill Clanton, and don't any of yuh stick yore heads outside until I tell yuh it's safe."

Long Sam was already backing out the door. He jumped aside, flattening against the wall, facing three men who came lurching towards the steps.

"Sally, you come out here!" Tuck Ollard roared, and started up the steps.

"Hold it, you!" Long Sam snapped.

Tuck Ollard came to a halt, sweat streaming down his face. The lamplight was reaching him now and Long Sam could see the man's eyes probing the shadows.

"Whoever yuh are, keep yore snoot out of family affairs, feller!" Tuck Ollard called out. "I'm here to bring Sally home, where she belongs. I had a hunch to look for her up here."

"What do yuh want with Sally?" Long Sam asked. He glanced now at the wiry little Dick Hume, who had stepped off to big Tuck Ollard's right. Skinny Whit Champion moved a pace to Ollard's left.

"We'll keep Buster, up there, from gettin' frisky, Tuck," Dick Hume said thinly. "Go on in, and waltz that filly out of there. We've got to know what happened out yonder where I found that quirt of hers."

"This tall cuss that backed out the door throwed the body of another feller down on the floor inside, Tuck," Whit Champion said gruffly. "Get along and gather up the gal. But take a look at the feller on the floor in there while you're at it."

"Mr. Jones, be careful!" Sally's voice called from inside the house. "That pesky quirt of mine has me trapped. That is the

one I tried to use on Bob Logan when he caught me snooping. I—I forgot all about it."

"Snoopin', was you?" Tuck Ollard bawled.

"That's enough, four-flusher!" Long Sam said coldly. "The game's up, Ollard. I left Bob Logan out yonder in that canyon where you three found him. That thing on the floor in there is Bill Clanton, the brains of yore sneaky little bandit gang."

"Tuck, we better make this fast and sudden!" Dick Hayden gulped.

"Me and Dick will take this gent out here, Tuck!" Whit Champion rapped the words out. "You get the filly."

"Simmer down, you two!" Tuck Ollard snorted. "This feller's talk don't make no sense. Long Sam Littlejohn and three other owlhooters held up the express office tonight, and got off with a batch of cash money. Bob Logan, one of my Boxed Eight riders, bumped into the fleein' outlaws, and got killed tryin' to stop them."

"But Sally's quirt bein' out there where you found Bob Logan sorta complicates things, eh, Tuck?" Long Sam asked gravely.

"Bob's body is layin' yonder on the road, less than a mile from town," Tuck Ollard hooted. "He bumped into them outlaws and was killed, right there. I found Sally's quirt out on the Boxed Eight range."

"Well, I've already made one mistake, looks like," Long Sam drawled. "I figgered Bill Clanton was the brains of yore bandit gang. But as fast and smooth as yuh can lie, mebbe you're the brains behind the bandit shenanigans, Tuck. Yuh moved Logan's body, eh?"

"Quit shootin' off yore mouth and step out here where we can look yuh over," Tuck Ollard snorted. "Come out into the light before—Who's hummin' that funeral music?"

"I was hummin'," Long Sam said flatly. "I've got a habit of hummin' that tune when I'm mad. And you're makin' me mad, Tuck. Shed yore gun belts, and do it careful. That goes for Dick Hayden and Whit Champion, too. I owe you three a killin', so don't tempt me."

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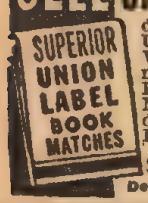

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"You some kind of a lawman, Jones?" Tuck Ollard asked slowly.

"I'm not a lawman, although I do sometimes dish out what you might call powdersmoke insurance against buzzards like you three runnin' over decent people," Long Sam declared. "And my name isn't Jones."

"Whatever yore name is, it'll be on a tombstone, if yuh don't pipe down and mind yore own business," Dick Hayden said angrily.

"Get on in there and fetch the girl, Tuck," Whit Champion insisted. "Dick and me will take care of Big Shorty, in case he wants to get ringy."

"Don't try it, Tuck," Long Sam said coldly.

"Who in thunder are you, and what's got yore bristles up at us boys?" Tuck Ollard asked angrily.

"I'm put out with you three because you've been helpin' Bill Clanton lay a batch of sneakin' robberies onto me," Long Sam said harshly. "The name, Ollard, is Littlejohn—Long Sam Littlejohn!"

DICK HAYDEN'S weapons cleared leather first, spewing fire and smoke as the wiry gunman scuttled for the shadows. Whit Champion's twin .45s cut loose a second later. Long Sam dug for his own weapons, while Tuck Ollard got the slack out of his jaw and hopped backwards off the steps, big hands swinging to the cedar grips of twin pistols.

But Long Sam was not watching Tuck Ollard, just then. The outlaw's guns came up and out in a smooth motion, spitting flame. He saw a bullet slap into Dick Hayden's grinning mouth. At the same instant a slug ripped Long Sam's left thigh, knocking him hard against the wall. He steadied himself with braced shoulders and caught Whit Champion with a double burst of gunfire that knocked the skinny tough spinning down.

Tuck Ollard was hunkered beneath the porch ledge, slanting his guns up, shooting at the flashes of Long Sam's weapons. The gaunt outlaw felt a bullet fan his cheek, and heard another hit the wall less than a foot from his head. He slanted his guns down and let the hammers skid out from beneath his thumbs

in unison, the double roar of them blending with a shot from Tuck Ollard's right hand Colt.

Long Sam reeled from the sting of a bullet burning his neck, lost his footing when his wounded leg gave way, and hit the porch rolling. He reared up with both guns cocked, but knew suddenly that he would not have to let the hammers fall again. Tuck Ollard was sprawled out there lifeless in a swath of lamplight.

Long Sam hastily reloaded his weapons, then got to his feet and limped off the porch. He stood there for a moment, sick and swaying, his eyes grimly studying each sprawled form. Sadly he shook his head, then went on around the house and out to where Sleeper stood.

A lot of people had heard the shooting and were coming up from town, their voices lifting in excitement. Long Sam crawled aboard his horse, then rode back past the house.

"All right, Sally!" he called. "Good

[*Turn page*]

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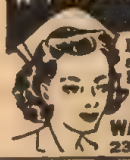

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luck with that ranch of yores, little lady."

"Sam wait!" the girl called.

But Long Sam did not wait. The crowd was getting close now, and he walked Sleeper off into the shadows. Out there in the deep pine timber, where he had camped the past five days, there was a cold spring where he could wash his wounds, and an undershirt he could use for bandages. He would be stove up for a while, and it would be mighty lonesome out there at the hidden spring.

But a man with a price on his head, Long Sam thought bitterly, had to face things like that. He touched Sleeper with rowels and rode a little faster, yet not making much sound as he slipped away into the night.

THE FRONTIER POST

(Continued from page 10)

harvest's on, he's the answer to the growers' prayer. When the harvest's in, nobody hankers to have him around.

So he heaps his simple belongings on a battered car, most always with a swarm of kids and their inevitable dog, and he's off to the next job, anywhere from one hundred to one thousand miles away. Or, if there's a wait between jobs, he puts into some shabby small town camp that caters to him and his kind.

Always a Stranger

Children coming from such camps definitely are not wanted in already overcrowded schools. If the crop worker or any of his family are victims of accident or illness, he finds county hospitals barred to transients, and busy doctors don't consider him an attraction in their waiting rooms. Registration requirements, ranging anywhere from 90 days to six months, in effect bar the wanderer from voting anywhere.

He's a nobody. He's a stranger wherever he goes. What are his opportunities for recreation and self-improvement? Some across-the-tracks pool hall, beer joint or travelling carnival, that's about all. As for Social Security benefits, they do not extend to agricultural workers. And as for the old age pension, every State requires proof of residence for a period prior to the application.

The crop worker's greatest need, above all the rest, is a broadened interpretation of legal residence. The migratory citizen should be recognized as a citizen-at-large. This will correct a heap of troubles that stem from his tumbleweed vocation.

Such changes are bound to come in time, when his numbers increase with the growing crop production of the West. To hasten that time, why don't the smart news johnnies tell about our displaced persons, so that the rest of us can figure out something to do about it?

One happy solution is for everybody to get in with us all in these Frontier Post get-togethers, where the fruit tramp problem has been aired right often. Some of you folks have been mighty kind about writing in to thank this whole-souled TEXAS RANGERS Magazine for so doing.

Fish and Game Taxes

Well, gals and galluses, let's get on to the subject of play instead of work. I see, by a government report, that about 11 million dollars has been raised this year by the 11 percent tax on sale of sporting goods—same to be spent to conserve and increase wildlife, and to improve fishing.

There's a saying that the fool squanders his leisure, the wise man invests it. Just which heading the fisherman comes under is a matter of opinion, I reckon.

Right now, an era has arrived in which the U. S. Reclamation Service is damming up western rivers on a scale that mighty few folks realize. Already, in California alone, there are 600 dams that have turned flowing rivers into chains of irrigation and power reservoirs and flood barriers.

Some of the lakes behind these dams are immense, such as Mead Lake, backed up by Boulder (Hoover) Dam, more than 100 miles long. Such waters can be cropped, same as the land. They are valuable, potential sources of food supply as well as recreation. But not much is really being done to develop that resource. Let's hope a good bit of that tax money finds its way to the U. S. Fish and Wildlife Service to improve matters for sportsmen.

As the population from Texas west increases, wholesome outdoor recreation becomes a pressing need. With fishing the most popular recreation, we need planners to make

[*Turn page*]

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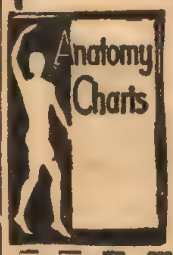

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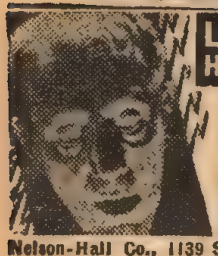

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NEXT MONTH'S ISSUE

IN the wide trough between two mountain ranges the cattle town of Cuesta drowsed in the sunshine. To the north were the Tierra Viejas, purple and gold and blue, a blaze of color softened by the eternal green of pinon and juniper. To the south were the Chinatis topped by towering Chinati Peak, their cliffs banded with scarlet, ochre and mauve, their canyons dark cave mouths under the overhang of the rugged cliffs.

The two great ranges threw their long shadows across the valley between, and included it in the outlandish legends and traditions that surrounded both. Between their mighty walls the valley was an ampitheatre, its floor a stage upon which stark drama finds a fit setting in THE WASTELAND EMPIRE, the smashing Jim Hatfield novel by Jackson Cole in the next issue of TEXAS RANGERS.

In Ace Hudson's saloon, the biggest and best Cuesta boasted, a fair crowd was assembled. Suddenly the cheerful clatter at the bar was stilled. Fast hoofs drummed the street without. The drinkers caught sight of a lathered horse racing down the street. The rider let out a thunderous whoop and waved his hat.

"It's Chuck Westbrook," somebody exclaimed. "Has that darn gold hunter gone plumb loco? Hey, look out!"

Chuck Westbrook abruptly swerved his speeding horse. Horse and man loomed in the doorway, then shot through it, the rider bending low.

Instantly the saloon was in an uproar. A poker table near the door up-ended as the players dived wildly to get away from the splaying irons that ripped long shavings from the floor boards as the frantic horse plunged to a stop. The drinkers at the bar dodged for cover, cursing and yelling. A bartender ducked down, came up with a cocked sawed-off shotgun. Ace Hudson, his dark face con-

vulsed with anger, leaped forward, hand streaking to his shoulder holster.

The wild-eyed horseman paid them no mind. He rose in his stirrups, yelled till the rafters shook, waved a plump rawhide poke over his head.

"Boys I've hit it!" he bellowed. "I've hit it big. The biggest thing this section ever knowed. And there's plenty for everybody! That grass mountain slope where Bear Creek Canyon opens toward the trail. There's a gravel bed under the grass, and its shot full of free gold. Look here!"

It was in this way that Chuck Westbrook brought the news of a gold strike to Cuesta. There was a rush to the location of the strike and here men located their claims. Westbrook made Ace Hudson his partner and had staked a claim along side of his before he had even ridden into town.

Westbrook predicted the strike was big and would bring thousands, and he proved a true prophet. On horseback, in wagons, in buckboards and on foot they came, eager, enthusiastic, fired with optimism. The whine of sawmill and the tapping of hammers echoed from the cliffs. Buildings arose as if Aladdin had rubbed his magic lamp and commanded them to be.

[*Turn page*]

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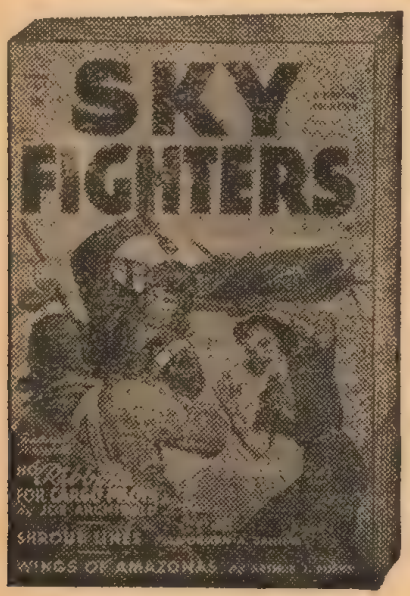

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Great freight wagons rumbled up the trail laden with tools, food and supplies. The word had gone out to the ranchers in the east of Cuesta Valley that here was a ready and profitable market for their surplus of beefs.

Hudson and Westbrook had their own notions as to naming the new town, but the miners took the initiative. Gravel Bank, they dubbed it and Gravel Bank it remained.

As the town grew larger the lawless element increased. John Clay, sheriff of the county, established an office in Gravel Bank, and swore in special deputies in an effort to combat the growing lawlessness. But the law of gun and knife continued as the predominant rule of the mining town. Finally, in desperation, Sheriff Clay wrote a letter. It was addressed to Captain William (Roarin' Bill) McDowell, Ranger Post Headquarters.

After McDowell received that letter a tall stranger arrived in Gravel Bank, a big salty hombre by the name of Jim Hatfield, and he found trouble waiting for him. First he tangled with a man named Jasper Gaunt in the saloon, and though he fought with Gaunt—he had a friend. He had left his horse, Goldy, in the town livery stable, and later that night he returned there.

He reached the stable door, reached a hand to the knob, fumbling his key from his pocket. Then abruptly he paused, staring at the door. When he and Gaunt had left the stable, he had distinctly heard old Mike turn the key in the lock, but now the door stood open a slight crack.

In men who ride much alone with danger as a constant stirrup companion, there births a subtle sixth sense that warns of peril when none is obviously apparent. In the Lone Wolf Ranger, this sense was highly developed. And now the soundless monitor was clamoring in his brain.

Shrugging his shoulders, he reached for the door knob again. Then he jumped a foot as a frightful scream shattered the silence. The scream was echoed by a yell of pain and a volley of curses.

Hatfield perked the door wide open and bounded in, swerving sideways along the wall in the same movement. A lance of flame gushed out of the darkness. The air quivered to a roaring report. Another gun barked and a bullet thudded into the wall close to Hatfield's head. A split second later both his long sixes let go with a shattering roar that rocked the building.

Other flashes stabbed the darkness. Hat-

field felt the wind of passing bullets, he felt the burn of one as it grazed his neck. He fired again and again at the flashes. It was blind and deadly work in the black dark swirling with powdersmoke.

Hatfield dropped to one knee and tilted the muzzles of his guns upward. A queer, croaking grunt sounded as the Colts flamed, and the thud of a heavy body striking the floor board. Again the forty-fives bucked in the Lone Wolf's hands and there was another thud on the floor.

When the stable keeper came rushing down the stairs carrying a lantern Hatfield discovered he had downed two men who obviously had been trying to steal Goldy. But that was only the start of his battle against the hidden foes who not only wanted the horse but his own life. . . .

How Hatfield fights and unmasks ruthless killers when he pits himself against sinister enemies with reckless daring—how he exposes a fiendish rangeland plot—are told in THE WASTELAND EMPIRE, a novel that carries the reader along at a breathless pace from start to finish! Look forward to Jim Hatfield at his fighting best in a yarn packed with fast action!

There will also be a careful selection of shorter Western yarns and interesting features in the next issue of TEXAS RANGERS. All in all, a splendid number is on the way!

OUR MAIL BAG

WE are always eager to hear from our readers—and of course that means *you*. Write and tell us which stories you enjoyed the most in this and other issues of TEXAS RANGERS. We value your opinions, for by knowing your likes and dislikes we are able to give you just the type of yarns you will enjoy the most. And now let's look over a few excerpts from some of the many fine letters we have been receiving:

I have been reading TEXAS RANGERS for over a year and in my estimation Jim Hatfield is tops. I also like the Doc Swap and the Long

[*Turn page*]

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Sam Littlejohn stories.—*Gertie Smith, Spring Hope, N. C.*

I read TEXAS RANGERS all the time. I like It better than all other Western Books. I like Doc Swap best next to Jim Hatfield.—*Beverly Garber, Springfield, Ohio.*

I read TEXAS RANGERS every month and I think it is a swell magazine. I think Jim Hatfield is wonderful.—*Donald Gleason, Pulaski, Va.*

What's the big idea of leaving "Doc Swap" out of your magazine? Don't listen to these purling infants who object to him. Old Doc is the high light of all your short stories—a fitting appetizer for the main dish. If Doc is not restored at once I am breaking off diplomatic relations with you as of now.—*C. C. Musick, Norfolk, Va.*

I have been reading TEXAS RANGERS over a year now and in my estimation it is the best Western magazine out. Let Jim Hatfield marry Anita Robertson because then Buck or his son can take over his place. You know Jim can't live forever. What happened to Doc Swap in the December issue?—*Jack Lewin, Philadelphia, Pa.*

I have been reading TEXAS RANGERS for a long time, but I've just finished reading THE GUN BOOSTERS and I was displeased. Please don't write any more stories with Jim Hatfield having a partner. What does he have the name of the Lone Wolf for? THE EMPIRE TRAIL was the best story I've read. Write some more similar to that one. I like your Doc Swap stories. They're all good for a laugh. I sure enjoy reading your magazine.—*Nevada Flynn, Amherst, Ohio.*

I have been reading TEXAS RANGERS for about three years, and I think they are great. I like Doc Swap, but think that MacLoyd should win occasionally. The one I like best next to Jim Hatfield is Long Sam Littlejohn. Please have him in more often. I think it is a great magazine for everyone who likes action.—*Richard Will, Mystic, Conn.*

That's all the letters we can quote from for this time. More will follow in coming issues—but whether we quote from your letter or not, you may be sure it is carefully read and studied and deeply appreciated. So keep them rolling in! Please address all your letters and postcards to The Editor, TEXAS RANGERS, 10 East 40th Street, New York, 16, N. Y. Thanks to everybody—and so long until the next issue.

—THE EDITOR.

P. S. Just a hint for Western fans—the new Paramount Pictures Technicolor hit called WHISPERING SMITH, starring Alan Ladd, is an epic of the railroading days—and the best thing of its kind ever done. I recommend it heartily for your entertainment.

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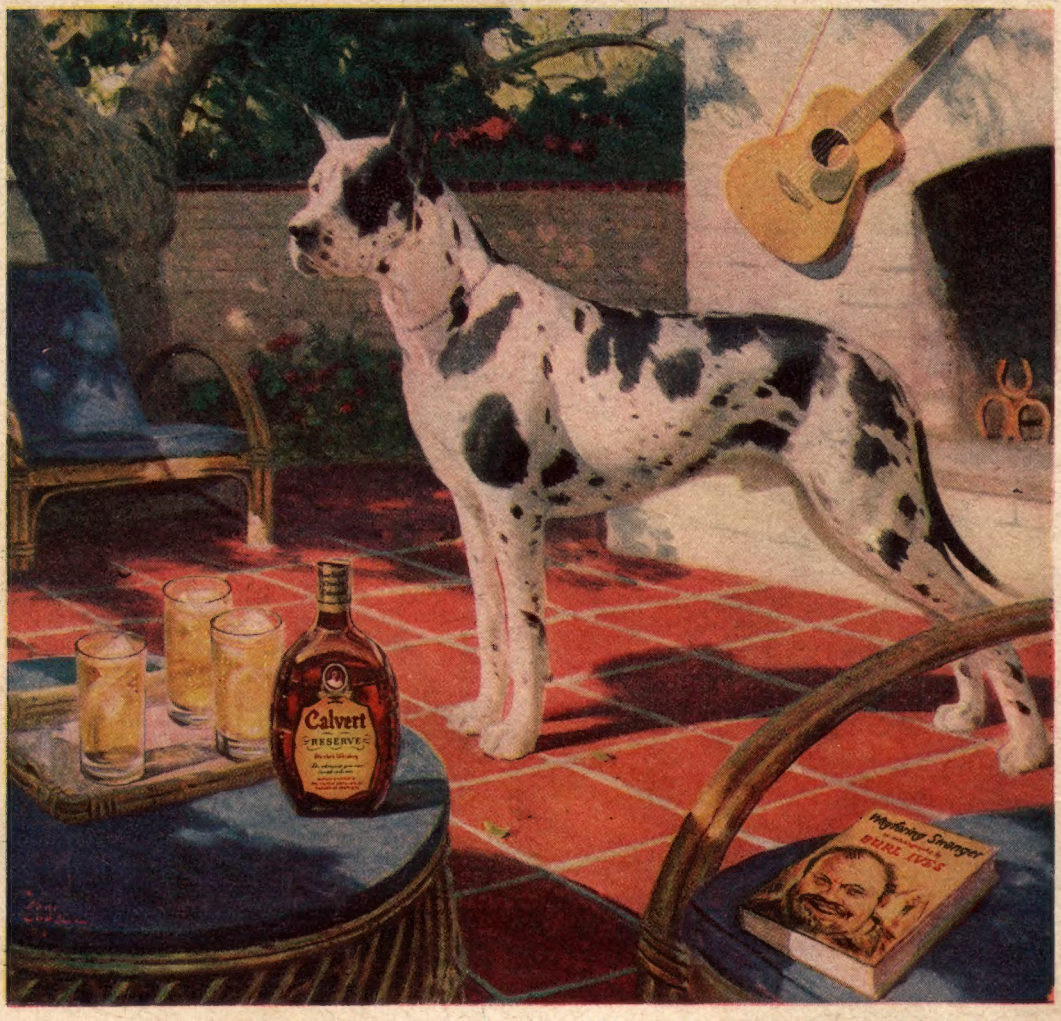

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